

Reincarnation in Ritual Display: A Discourse of the *Alekwu* Mythopoeia in Idoma Traditional Dramaturgy

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Abstract—This paper is the outcome of an indigenous study in theatre arts that was carried out in the traditional society of Idoma in central Nigeria. In this study, it was discovered that theatre is an active grid in the Idoma social and religious systems. Space, stage and the earth are fundamental elements that are very important aspects of Idoma theatre practice. This paper discusses the utilitarian values of ancestors in accomplishing life aspirations among the Idoma people. It has studied Idoma theatre both as media and as processes of articulating the link between worldview and everyday living systems. In carrying the research the paper employed a qualitative approach to methodology. We employed interviews, used available literatures and participation observation to collect the data for this research. The paper showed that theatre can serve as tool for social cohesion as well as source of historical records. It showed that apart from providing entertainment and recreation, theatre can contribute to social development through the sustenance of collective approach, which enhances teamwork and group participation to achieve supportive goals. The study found that many researchers have abandoned academic inquiry in traditional theatre studies. As a result, much research needs to be done particularly in the area of African masquerade theatres.

Index Terms—Reincarnation, space, masquerade, mythology.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of theatre in this paper is ingrained in the definition derived from the outcome of a research conducted in an indigenous African performance. This paper reports the results of this research which I conducted in three Akweya communities among the Idoma. They are Adim, Ogyoma and Otogwi, all in Otukpo Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria. In these areas, theatre understood, not simply a cultural pastime but a core essence in the people's worldview. Masquerade theatre is an ancient performance, has been developed by traditional artists and used over the years as functional pastoral process of social engagement and spiritual precursor in the absence functional agencies of development. Masquerade theatre has served as one of the Idoma system of entertainment as well as judicial organ. Even in the 21st century, this theatre form remains relevant among many Idoma communities.

II. SOME BASIC CLARIFICATIONS

According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of

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Current English defines the masquerade as:

- 1) A way of behaving that hides the truth or a person's true feelings
- 2) A type of party where people wear special costumes and MASK over their faces, to hide their identities
- 3) Pretending to be sth that you are not; a commercial advertiser masquerading as private individual". In this perception, "mask" is defined as the attempt "to cover with or put on a mask". This is meant to "conceal or disguise" [1].

Following the above, "mask" is etymologically explained as deriving from the Spanish word "mascara" and the Arabic word "mask barah". "Mascara" in Spanish means "clown" while in Arabic "barah" means "to ridicule". It would then be correct to say that contemporary English evolution and meaning of the word "mask" traces its origin from the Arabic and Spanish typologies. It is also clear that the use to which the word is put, as presented in English drama suggests mimicking, or acting like another person, or grotesque representations. By this reading masking and or masquerading are presented as secular human jocular or profane activities meant for audience's enjoyment and entertainment.

This thinking can be further explained in the presentation of masks in theatrical performances from classical Greek drama, the Elizabethan drama and contemporary English drama. As pointed out by Thomas Miachi.

Pretence, disguise and ridicule are ... significant attributes of the masquerade in Western thought. These meanings owe their origins to situations in and around Europe, from classical Greek, through Roman civilization and perhaps, influenced by pre – Islamic Arabian thought and civilization. In classical Greek theatre for instance, actors put on masks to hide their identity. Prominent among such actors was Hypocritus whose name has since become the eponym for words like hypocrite or hypocrisy which means pretending to be what one are really not [2].

In agreement with Miachi, Barranger also presents additional views, explaining in even greater details the linguistic interpretations given to the word "mask" by English Dictionaries. Nolly Barranger's lucid picture of the European interpretation is presented in full length below:

Mask-making is an ancient art dating from early cultures, where masks were thought to possess supernatural powers. Masks have been part of the early theatrical traditions of both East and West. The use of masks was common in ancient Greek and Roman theater, commedia dell'arte, and Japanese nō plays. Masks enlarge the actor's features for visibility at great distances, and they express basic emotions, such as

grief, anger, horror, sadness, or pity. They also can create an altogether different presence for the actor wearing the mask. That presence can be stately, heroic, awesome, or mysterious. If the mask reflects light, it can even appear to change expression as the light changes. Today, masks are comfortable, strong, lightweight, and molded to the contours of the actor's face. The costume designer has final approval of the actor's mask [3] (Emphasis mine).

From this reading, one can say that masks are used all over the world. Also, it can be deduced that different people use the masquerade forms differently. Given the linguistic reading that one draws from contemporary European understanding of masquerade practices, it can be assumed that there are attempts to universalize concepts. Perhaps, it is an attempt to "Europeanize" scholarship, a possible imposition of the goals of globalization on other peoples of the earth.

To illustrate this point further, Harding's review of the African masquerade is revisited. Harding's interpretation of masquerade performances in Africa is from the European understanding of the masquerade. She discussed the masquerade from the point of view of a dramatic performance where masquerades represent characters on stage. During one particular performance, an African masquerade is described as an actor, wearing a costume and acting out roles assigned to him. Harding said the masked performer was playing a role in the attempt "to penetrate the physical barrier of the costume and mask and the psychological barrier of the belief of the masker and that of the audience" [4].

Harding's presentations underscore a typical attempt to lithograph what is essentially a socio-ethereal performance. In the first place it is difficult to ascertain the level of possibility of explaining the given in relation between the actor as well as his mind's introspections. That an actor self-extends beyond physical performance, and the researcher is able to penetrate the mind and the psychological barrier of the belief of the masked actor and that of the audience, is very difficult exercise. This presentation gives rise to unanswered questions. It is easy to do a critique of a drama performance in a University Theatre. It is also easy to assess the level of role-play and interpretation of characters by the actors. It is equally easy to examine the relevant issues raised during such productions. In these cases, actors can be quizzed and the Director interviewed. But it is a Herculean task, almost impossible to subject any serious African masquerade to an interview. It is also difficult to vividly account for the emotion of an individual in the audience during a masquerade performance, an Alekwu Passage, for instance? Conditioned by the intrinsic phenomenal ideation of masquerade theatre traditions in many African societies, the masquerade is regarded as a spirit being appearing in physical form. As Rotimi puts it, "the mask is the 'abode' of a particular power, the breeding place of the spirits of the departed elders, the resting quarters of the communal secrets..." [5].

The masquerade is not an actor in the sense portrayed by Harding. The masquerade cannot be, in the view of Harding, a human performer or an actor replacing a character. It will be,

incorrect to treat the African masquerade as performing artists in a University theatre, and as a result, make the masquerade to carry out theatrical mandates like maintaining a character in a written script. The explanation is a mixture of cultural currencies and does not present an appropriate reading. From Harding, one sees according to Soyinka, a likely enunciation of complete "abandonment of the belief in culture as defined within man's knowledge of fundamental unchanging relationships between himself and society and within the larger context of the observable universe" [6].

In the context of masquerade theatre practices, Harding's notion may not be correct. In traditional African theatre the issues of "self-abandonment", "the human performer", and "assumption of character" have different interpretations. The African masquerade makes an entry, usually into the arena for a presentation that is set in the cosmic environment of the celebrating community. The coming of the masquerade (an ancestral visitation) is itself an actualization of a faith accompli. The process resolves some metaphysical uncertainties that constantly threaten the wellbeing of the people. Masquerade performance in Africa is an aspect of socio-religious continuum. There is no disguise. There is no pretense. There is no assumption, at least not in the perspective of Harding. But there are actors. There are also audiences. There is a stage, a communal stage; there is stage business. There are dances, costumes, makeup, props, music that make for total theatre.

The masquerade performance is a theatrical recapitulation on a psychophysically affective plane, directed by the living and actualized by the visiting ancestors. These are the activities of a theatre tradition necessitated by the unending need for plenitude to achieve communion between the world of the ancestors and the world of the living.

III. THE IDOMA PEOPLE

Idoma is an ethnic group regarded as the second largest in Benue State, Nigeria. Idoma people occupy an area of land that covers, according to Erim, "approximately 5,956 sq km and located within the broad valley of the Benue and Cross River basin ... the main thrust of Idomaland is an elongated belt of territory from the Benue River to the northern fringes of Igboland" [7].

For the average Idoma cast of mind, the existence of the ancestors in the Idoma pantheon is as real as the physical structures of the houses they live in. The issues of ancestral expression are well rooted in the understanding of the Idoma idiom of being and the process of becoming. Testimonies of these can be gleaned from the abundant replications of references associated with ancestral powers in religious, historical and social-spiritual lives. Ordinarily, one would think that death is the state of extinction. In Idoma, it believed that people die, and after some time the dead come back to life through the process of reincarnation. This process exists in two forms. One is the process whereby a family uses ritual medium to create masquerades which symbolize the spirit of their dead father. Secondly, reincarnation is viewed from the perspective of the dead coming back to life through the birth of a newly born child.

The Idoma cosmology provides recurrent pictures and

analogies that portray the presence of their forebears in physical and tangible forms. According to the worldview, the ancestors who exist in spirit forms live and commiserate with their relations in various ways. For instance, Idoma ancestors are presented as archetypes of morality and aesthetics in various theatrical forms done through masquerades, music and dance performances. Through this form the ancestors provide their human peers with various religious, social and dramaturgic functions. By so doing they govern and regulate the human society, which is always in constant need of reforms. This is why in times of celebrations the ancestors that are themselves protagonists present as favorite deities who are worshiped and venerated.

The activities that express the attitude of veneration are conveyed through ritual dramatic modes of presentations. Through the theatrical medium human problems are extenuated, and the forces which constantly challenge their well-being are projected in performances and characterized as cosmogonic forces. These play functional roles in human environments in a manner that the physical, social and the psychic are harmonized.

IV. THE SPATIAL PHENOMENON

The element of space, cosmos and earth, are considered as integral whole in Idoma traditional theatre. The examination of these elements is crucial and central to the discussions in this paper. One of the major preoccupations in traditional theatre in Idoma is the recurrent engagement of the themes of fundamental unchanging truths. The themes often reflect the relationship between man and his society on the one hand and this relationship as obtainable within the larger context of the observable universe. The Alekwo masquerade creation, which is a “reincarnation” process, is performed against this background and dramatizes the symbolic recapitulation of space, earth and cosmos. It presents through the theatrical environment where the Alekwo masquerade performs with elegant indulgence. The masquerades’ performances coupled with the voice and language prefecture add up to give the enthralled audience opportunities for pleasure, delight and satisfaction, which do not come often in traditional societies. During the performances, the human apparatus (audience) who are all participants on the communal stage are themselves dwarfed by the masquerades’ transcendental density. Also as co-players in the drama of “reincarnation”, the musicians who form a choral group add more value to the mystical strength through drumming, singing and chants. These present a theatrical fleshpot through which the Idoma people venture into the ethereal plane to vitalize their metaphysical connection.

The performance is a ritual transaction that rationalizes the mystery of living and in other to regenerate the issues of survival [8]. In Idoma theatre, the performances facilitate the understanding of the relationship between man, the spatial phenomenon (the symbolic stage) and the universe. This makes the theatre to be a medium as well as a platform for realizing communal empathy. The Alekwo “reincarnation” drama is therefore the Idoma medium through which the people come to terms with the spatial phenomenon of their being. At the same time, the Idoma nationality which is

usually the sensitive aspect is firmed up through the instrumentality of epic, history and drama. According to Adama, “The very attempt by the performers, to enmesh themselves into this cosmic dramatic space leaves them with a transactional experience on the psycho-physical affective plane” [9].

Our interpretation of space where the performances take place is not that physical stage that provides accommodation for performers and spectators as represented by other interpretations. Space is that manageable contraption of the cosmic envelope, which encapsulates the totality of the people’s worldviews as illustrated in their traditional theatre. Also as Alpha noted, “stage in the traditional milieu is a transcendental artistic medium for articulation the relationship between spirituality and materiality. The natural bond can only be explained through symbolic representations in space and time” [10]. Viewed from this understanding the reincarnation drama underscores a symbolic representation drawn from the historical poesy contained in the Alekwo performance.

V. MYTH AND THE ALEKWU MASQUERADE BEING IN IDOMA

The regeneration of ancestral beings through the masquerade medium is a popular art among the Idoma. Masquerades in Idoma align mythography with their concrete realities. With a firm belief in the ancestral cannon, the average Idoma would easily blend social manifestations with spiritual occurrences. The gap between the mundane and the metaphysical is to them very thin. In this view.

The healthy eyes of our people see many things that the impaired ones do not. Elders do see and touch the works of ancestor whose presence, is more felt than that of the pulsating living being sitting there. You may not be able to see the ancestor’s head but you will surely see his hand, his works and deeds [11].

This is a popular idiom amongst the traditional folk that buttresses the analogy of the strong presence of ancestors in their daily lives.

The Alekwo masquerade holds enormous implications for the Idoma people. It is part of the rich cultural heritage around which the cradle of the Idoma civilization revolves. According to the Idoma cosmology, life is an unending continuum. Man is essentially a spiritual being. His relationship with his forebears stems from the understanding that man is also a spiritual being. Alekwo, which is one aspect of humanity’s being is a spirit. Ordinarily, spirits are not seen nor do they make appearances in tangible forms. On the other hand, in Idoma it is believed that death is not the termination of life. Death is understood as a process of passing on to another level of existence. According to Alachi, “In death those who have passed on sojourn to a realm called Okoto. Here they undergo a transformation process where they lose their physical state”. James AtuAlachi is a professor of Theatre Arts in Benue State University. He granted this interview in January, 2004. The interview was part of my research. The manifestation of conflict in the world of the living, traces man’s undoing to his inability to understand the designs and functions of the spirits in the ethereal world.

Alachi is therefore of the view that the interpretation of the Idoma mythology is of fundamental importance to our present development. The thinking of Idoma people is that every physical occurrence has a spiritual antecedent.

Although this view may not be of scientifically proven, the presentation of the connection between the world of the living and that of the ancestors in Okoto, exists in traditional mythoi. Perhaps it is in line with that Alachi said:

Within the given cosmic ambience of the Idoma pantheon, life is an ever cyclical movement. Man journeys through life in three stages. Childhood which begins in the east where the sun rises; adulthood which seems to be centered in the cosmic universe and old age which ends where the sun sets for the man in the west, after which it reemerges in the east, in its ever cyclic motion, of rebirth [12].

Idoma masquerade dramaturgy is the improvisation of worldview. Masquerade theatre in Idoma is the art whereby metaphysical articulation of sustains belief in cyclicity. The dramaturgy is hinged on the philosophy of contraries. Viewed in this way, man is seen as the composition of materiality and spirituality. According to Ada Egri Oplekwu, ancestors who are spirits differ in form from everything ordinary. Particularly those who had died in a ripe old age and transform into ancestors are believed to have the powers of controlling the destiny of their living relations. Ada, Egri Oplekwu holds the title of Osakpatenyi in Adim/Akpa. As one of the chiefs in the community, he spoke to me with great insight concerning the roles that ancestors play in molding the destiny of people. As at the time of interview, he was about 78 years old. In the view of Ada, the worldview, properly locates the ancestral masquerades in scheme of life. Another way of explaining this fixture is to examine the roles played by divinities in the affairs of men.

The position of Owoicho, the Idoma name for the Almighty God, in relation to that of the ancestors in this cosmic arrangement is based on what can be termed “power-deregulation”. In traditional Idoma society, ancestors are believed to be empowered with delegated authority, while Owoicho is God of them all. Note that Owo, which means personal god or guardian spirit, also refers to a related ancestor. Owo can again refer to the dead who has come back to life through reincarnation. By implication Owo – Icho, which translated means God above, is actually the all controlling divinity that is above all Owos.

However, maintains a closer relationship with the living albeit their spiritual entity. Like the Christian Angels, Owo is believed to wield tremendous influence in the lives of their living relations. Whenever offences are perpetrated and catastrophe is imminent, Owo would be invited to stem the tide of that evil. The community is always awake to these responsibilities. According to Amali Samsudeen, when disaster strikes, Owo is called upon to cushion or stop further occurrences of danger that would have hitherto affected the serenity of the society [13].

These among others define the role of masquerades/ancestors that necessitate the central place of the divinity in the life of the Idoma. Their veneration is a communal norm and masquerade art is one of the most functional medium of actualizing their roles. Alekwu is

therefore a masquerade ancestor brought to the land of the living through communal art. It is not surprising that the recurrent themes of many Idoma festivals or performances often dwell on a common goal. For instance, ancestors play as protagonists in festive performances that highlight issues of survival or related challenges of social cohesion and the well-being of the people.

Viewed in this light, drama in traditional Idoma societies function as an essential repository from where the essence and the vicissitudes of life can be wrested and properly “essentialized”. The Idoma theatre builds upon symbolic poesy with the ancestors playing archetypal roles. The Alekwu masquerade performance is thus a phenomenon that provides the Idoma audience with traditional modes of achieving communal goals. Traditional symbols define the paradigm of the performances. Perhaps, it is in line with this that Halgeme, quoting Soyinka states,

There are no reserved spaces for the [Alekwu] protagonists. For his very act of representational being is defined in turn by nothing less than the infinite cosmos within which the origin of the community and contemporaneous experiences of being is firmly embedded [14].

Much of the information about the coming into being of the Alekwu is derived from oral tradition. This source also provides substantial amount of primary data for Idoma history. Alekwu performance is a sustained aspect of Idoma culture. Masquerade performance is a deeply rooted tradition among the Idoma. The performance tradition has served as source of important documentation for Idoma people. It records the genealogies, histories and family backgrounds of Idoma people across the ages. According to Amali Idris, “the Alekwu chants the history of the land, the genealogies of the lineages and the families of the land. It is the duty of an Alekwu to know the history of everybody in the land very well” [15].

The *Alekwu* as one of Idoma’s most distinguished masquerade forms has been with them since the earliest times in their history. According to Jalafo who quoted Amali, Idris, the practice of this subjunctive art form in the present Idoma societies dates back to 1535 – 1565, in the periods following the years of migration from Apa, the nucleus of Idoma origin [16]. This source traces the history of the incipience of Alekwu practice among the Idoma to the years following the period of dispersal from the old Kwararafa kingdom in the period mentioned above. This means that the practice has been for long entrenched in Idoma socio-cultural milieu. In this sense one agrees with Rotimi that “The root go beyond there... very likely they lie where they have been found among the other people of the earth, deep in the past of the race” [17].

Historically therefore the Alekwu masquerade art has over the years served as medium for purification, actualizing communal goals, provision of checks and balances within the different Idoma societies as well as providing the major source Idoma history. According to Amali Amusa, the Alekwu dramaturgy has helped to sustain the people’s civilization, morality, history and culture. From this perspective, more research on the traditional art of Idoma is needed for the art to be “... reviewed closely with the aid of

oral traditions in order to give them new life and historical vibrancy" [18].

In spite of the historical importance of this art, research in the area has been lacking. The cosmological rite of passage involved in the practice notwithstanding, the art remains essentially ephemeral performance involving a combination of drama, dance, music, mime, language, aesthetics and costume.

VI. CONCLUSION

As stated above, *Alekwu* is the spirit of an ancestor in a masquerade form. The Idoma people conceive masquerades generally as spirits. The physical appearances of spirits are usually left to the realm of imagination. Perhaps this explains the unusual appearance, the deliberate and distorted shapes that Idoma masquerades are given to.

We have also attempted to present the making of *Alekwu* theatre as a way of understanding the communal legacy upon which Idoma theatre is anchored. The centerpiece of Idoma customs and traditions can be located in the ancestral figure. The concept of space in relation to the traditional theatre practice also draws with ever-increasing returns from the Idoma mythology. We have stated that traditional theatre documents the artistic, historical, philosophical, psychological and the socio-spiritual lives of the Idoma. Around these, the foundation of the society is built. Also discussed is the fact that "reincarnation" process is articulated by theatre arts of the people. However, the form, style, content and the practice lack proper investigation and research. Art, like every human system is dynamic. Although these values have facilitated the development of Idoma art form, it should continue to make rooms for new improvement so far as this occurs within the limits of acceptable practice.

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