

The Use of Festival Drama in Promoting Nigerian
Culture:
The Example of The Odo Festival Drama

BY

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Abstract:

Culture is a human concept, a social heritage of any society which is always specific and distinctive way of life of a group of people. By this, we mean that culture has meaning only with human person. Every human being is born into a cultural milieu rather than being organically transmitted at conception as a genetic characteristic of an offspring. Adopting the functionalist approach which suggests that several aspects of society have functions they played in maintaining the social order as a whole, the crux of this paper therefore, is to showcase how we can use festival drama which is part of our culture in promoting Nigerian culture. This can only be achieved if we give up most of the borrowed western cultures that has invariably made a mess of our avowed traditional values.

Introduction

Culture, according to *The Chambers Dictionary* (2000:379) implies "...refinement in manners, thought, taste, etc..., a type of civilization; the attitude and values which inform a society..." Uwandu and Nwankwor (2006:73) writing on "The Concept of Culture in the Nigerian social system" posited that culture has contents. Culture contents include beliefs, morals, norms, laws, customs values etc. This is in line with the handy definition that culture includes the total way of life of the people. Virtues as well as values, they added, are indispensable aspect of each culture. As a matter of fact, the rate of cultural advancement in a given society depends on the level of the society's moral value or virtues of consciousness. These are salient ingredients that make the food spicy.

Festival as defined by *The Chambers Dictionary* (2000:595) is "...a joyful or honourific celebration; a religious feast; a season of or series of performances of music, plays, (drama) etc".

Having looked at these terms, let's go back to the topic of discussion which is The Use of Festival Drama in Promoting Nigerian Culture.

Before the arrival and influence of western education and civilization which introduced writing, the Igbo had

different ways of educating her young. This method of enculturation is through oral tradition. It is called so because it lacks written script and is handed down from generation to generation through the words of mouth. Traditions are values, beliefs, rules, and behaviour patterns that are shared by a group and are passed on from generation to generation as part of the socialization process. This is part of the culture of the people.

In this paper therefore, we will look into the Odo festival drama in Ikem, Isi-Uzọ L.G.A. of Enugu State with a view to assessing its relationship with culture. However, before going further, let us provide a working definition of drama. Nnabuihe (1996: 11) writes that:

Etymologically, the Igbo word for drama is “ejije”. This is derived from “jije/nomi”, meaning imitate, to arrive at the noun form known as “njije/nñomi”, meaning mimesis or imitation. Therefore, drama should be seen as an imitation of actions or characters by a person or group of persons otherwise known as actor(s) whose aim is to mimic, entertain and edify.

Eghagha (2001:470) sees drama as any work of art created to be performed on stage, which through the aid of characters and actors convey a message to an audience for the purpose of education, entertainment and information.

Clark (1968) in Akporobaro (2012: 465) categorizes Nigerian drama into two main divisions – the traditional and the modern drama. Clark further sub-divides the

traditional drama into two groups – the sacred and the secular. Within the sacred drama, he identifies another two sub-groups, the one having to do with ancestral or myth plays and the one having to do with masquerades or plays carried out by cult. The most notable of these dramas was the masquerade display such as Odo, Ọmabe, Oriọkpa, Mmọnwu, Ekpè among others.

Going by the statement made by Clark (1965) in Akporobaro (2012: 472) that:

If drama means the “elegant imitation” of some action significant to a people, if this means the physical representation or the evocation of one poetic image or a complex of such images, if the vital elements to such representation or evocation are speech, music, ritual, song, as well as dance and mime, and ... the aim is to open the ear of the mind of a spectator in a corporate audience and open his eyes to the beauty of form...”

Then the Odo festival drama has got much to offer.

By its very nature, drama aims at developing and influencing for good the character of the child through imprints on the child’s mind as well as making him memorize and retain the values which will make him attain laudable goals in life. This is why Barnfield (1975:15) asserts that “drama deals directly with the child’s memory, understanding, will, imagination, emotion, observation and person”.

Purpose of the Study

Odo whether as a masquerade or deity has its origin in ritual and religion and therefore an important indicator of people's interest, belief, values, and various aspects of social life which is part of their culture. In recent times, there has been a great decline in the participation of people in the festival. This is because the people are beginning to see it as agent of human destruction ignoring the reasons for the rituals and sacrifices performed during the festival. Moreover, since the culture is about being destroyed, it will keep our memories fresh and serve as a documentary on a cultural phenomenon which is about to be phased out in this community as a result of advancement in Christianity. The purpose of this paper is therefore to demonstrate that apart from the ritual and religious inclination of the Odo festival drama, entertainment, as well as source of relaxation for the performers, it still serves as a means of promoting the culture of the people.

Traditional Festival Dramas as Promoters of Culture:

According to Okafor and Emeka (2006:95-96),

Traditional festivals and ceremonies punctuate the traditional calendar and mark the rhythm of traditional life. Whatever nature they take, those festivals and ceremonies are indices to social values or what the people live by; reflect the individual in the context of society or in the context of the people's cosmos and worldview; reflect or celebrate societal organization or structure; are a symbol of continuity; often engage productive or

creative activities; occur in societal, predetermined times or manners; have powerful dramatic messages and contexts and serve as integrative forces in the communities. Every one of them is, in a true sense, a celebration of life.

Shobayo (2007), writing on the title “Preserving Culture through Festival” in *Nigerian Tribune* of March 7, says of the Angas of Plateau State that:

in spite of the advent of Christianity which seems to have relegated the culture of the people to the background, the Angas still holds on tenaciously to some of their traditional beliefs...The most popular annual festival regarded as the symbol of unity among the Angas is the *Pusdung*, often celebrated after the harvest period...mainly to showcase the rich culture of the Angas and has jollifications, dances by different types of masquerades and beer drinking especially the local liquor such as ‘burukutu’ which often go down with ‘Namas’ otherwise called dog meat.

Asomba (2001:38) made reference to the village feast in *Things Fall Apart* where Achebe portrays a family feast on the occasion of a marriage which is also part of our culture:

Okonkwo’s friend was celebrating his daughter’s *Uri*. It was a day on which her suitor, having already paid the greater part

of her bride price, would bring palm wine, not only to her parents and immediate relatives, but to the wide and extensive group of kinsmen called 'Umunna'. Everybody had been invited, women and children. But it was really a woman's ceremony and the central figures were the bride and her mother. The picture which emerges is of a well ordered socio-cultural community.

Although *Odo* is cult restricted to males, its social significance is wholly a communal affair. Without the women, the foods for the spirit would not be prepared and without them the dramatic performances which take place during the public appearances of these spirits within the ancestral squares and market places would lack their conventional ritual and aesthetic fulfillment. (Amankulor in Ofomata (2002:400).

The Origin and Characteristics of Odo

Odo is the men's secret cult in Ikem. It has a dual existence. Its physical appearance is that of a fierce looking masquerade while its spiritual nature lies in its powers as one of the great messengers of Supreme God. Its origin is not known. There are many myths about its origin most of which point to the fact that *Odo* was originally from the Supreme Deity and comes as a messenger of God to this world in order to direct and protect his children on earth. Thus, *Odo* is believed to be the incarnate of the dead ancestors who continue to take

an active interest in the affairs of their living descendants and relations.

Odo lives in the spirit world. It comes out once in every two years through the thick forest called “Uham” and stays on earth with its people for five months. It comes out in the fourth moon of the year which often falls in the month of December and it stays till the end of May. When it is with the people, it looks after them in every facet of life. Even after it retires to the spirit world, it still looks after its people on earth; serving as a mediator between its men on earth and “Ezechitoke” and sees that their problems were solved before the next round of its emergence to the physical world. It is believed that *Odo* sees and knows all secrets in the spirit world and those on earth.

***Odo* as a Festival Drama in Ikem**

Odo manifests itself within the context of festival. This festival dramatizes in symbolic and aesthetic terms, the major ritual and religious events of the people’s collectively shared experiences. The drama takes place once in two years. It is a re-enactment of the cycle of life and death. From man’s experience, there is birth, growth, and death, and perpetuation through the cult of the ancestors. Through this drama, ancestral spirits return periodically, re-unite with the living, shed their munificence among the living and then depart to reappear during the next cycle of ritual celebration. From the agricultural point of view, it represents the cycle of planting and reaping and planting again. We know that

planting is followed by germination, growth, maturation, and harvesting.

Initiation into adulthood is an important aspect of traditional educational process. The steps are rigorous and ritualized, often involving self-denial and imposed physical affliction. After passing through these rigours, the initiate becomes a man, who can be trusted with the maintenance of secrets regarding things sacred. Let it be known at this point that initiation does not make the new initiate super-human; he is still his human self except that he has after going through the rites, been regarded as much more knowledgeable and responsible in the society. The dramatic content of *Odo* cult cannot be treated in isolation. They are interwoven with festivals. According to Modum (1978: 46):

The social and moral life in African traditional societies should be seen to be organized around festival manifestations which fulfill the functions of social and moral control as well as provide entertainment and diversions. The ceremonies are therefore important as indicators of group interests and values and various aspects of social life. Okebalama (1991: 1) opines that “drama is a reenactment of life”. He further says that “the Igbo find it convenient to express their feelings (part of their culture and experience) through recreational activities, rituals, myths, legends, folktales, ceremonies, festivals and masquerade play. Okebalama (2003: 84) posits that festivals are communally owned such as Ékpè, Eshe, and Omabe of Nsukka while ceremony is an

individual affair such as child naming and marriage ceremonies which are all aspects of culture.

Conclusion

The important aspect of the civilization of Africa is concerned with the geographical or racial origin of the people called 'Bantu'. They have an adequate language and the traditions (culture) of the tribes are preserved by oral narratives and folklore (which festival drama is one of them) Manjula (2012:6). If we accept the definition of Culture as the "...refinement in manners, thought, taste, etc..., a type of civilization; the attitude and values which inform a society..." then festival drama which forms part of our culture has the capacity of expressing the thoughts and feelings of the people and has rules for forming intelligible communication in the community which has it as a common currency.

Besides, the functions of drama among others include correcting the ills in the society through satire and other licentious activities; to preserve the cultural and traditional heritages, and to assert cultural identity and sense of belonging; to promote the harmonious co-existence of the various groups in the society, especially the communities where the theatrical (dramatic) activities – festivals, rituals, etc take place (Ademeso 2001:463). This festival helps to inculcate in the growing child the norms and values of the society as it leaves imprints on the memories of the child according to Barnfield.

Recommendation

1. There should therefore be a re-introduction of story- telling in our homes.
2. We should revitalize festival dramas in our villages to inculcate our rich cultural values into our modern society.
3. We should decry the enthronement of western culture as against our traditional cultural heritage.
4. Our curriculum planners should incorporate cultural courses into the curriculum.
5. Government should adopt some of these festivals into tourism and tourist attractions.

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