

Music and Dance in Community Folk Play Performance Culture: An Example of Ebira-Mattaga Players in Nigeria.

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Abstract

The representational application of music and dance in drama and theatre performance is a common practice in places where oral culture thrives, especially in Africa. In Nigeria, music and dance constitute an integral part of indigenous drama and theatrical performances. Thus, application of music and dance in folk play performance usually represents a people's past and present experiences and socio-cultural values by which they live. Ebira people, otherwise known as Anebira of central Nigeria usually employ significant use of music and dance in both ritual and recreational theatre and play performances to deliver messages of great moral values.

This paper explores the functional aspect of the Ebira theatre as tool for social and cultural development. It argues that the music and dance aspect of the performance, enable Ebira-Mattaga players to create awareness, mobilize, as well as educate the people about destructive practices and vices that can cause decay within the society. The performance is geared towards the sanitation of the society.

Keyword: Dance, Music, Play, Ebira, Mattaga Theatre

Introduction

The role of music and dance is central in Ebira theatrical performances. The two plays integral function in every given Ebira traditional festivals and ceremonies. Music and dance, like in every other African culture, serve the significant purpose of meeting the spiritual and social quest of individual Anebira and communities. They also serve as the life wire of Ebira recreational comic and satiric play performances. Therefore, the functional application or use of music and dance in Ebira drama is usually propelled at delivering thought provoking messages targeted at purging people of immoral characters and sanitizing the society. This is because music and dance constitute the most influential and commonest elements of the people's culture that every individual can easily comprehend.

Stylized play performance (Drama) whereby human activities and experiences are recreated by fictional characters to purge the society of its moral decadence, has always been an integral part of indigenous Ebira theatre tradition. Drama in Ebira culture is a functional art form and impacting part of the social system. It usually involves the participation of members of the community in the chorus composed of singing, dancing and humorous dialogue or comedy. J. S. Illah (2004, p. 3) asserts that, "theatre has always been part of human society. Every community has developed, over time, a theatre that suits its way of life, its pressures and shifts in attitudes".

Drama or play performance among Ebira people is usually a recreational activity permeated with domineering presence of music and pantomimic dance movement to emphasize the content of the play. Thus, the function of the duo goes beyond mere entertainment accompaniment and interlude because they constitute the central channel of expression and impacting vehicle of message delivery. Dialogues in Ebira drama is characterized by sarcastic

and idiomatic rhetoric and songs that tend to address certain matters of interest. The content of the songs usually exposes societal activities, ills and consequences as well as proffering solutions to issues of life as they affect the people. The drummers play a vital role of electrifying and sustaining the span of performance while the participating artistes and streaming audience occupy themselves with singing, pantomime and symbolic dance movements that portrays certain characters and events in the community. Therefore, theatre performance holds an important position among the Anebira because it is a medium by which they set moral standard for the development of their socio-cultural environment.

Etymology of Drama in Ebira Culture

The Ebiras otherwise known as Anebira are largely found in the rocky and hilly terrain of central Nigeria. They have a rich theatre culture comprising various ritual and recreational festivals, ceremonies, music, dance and drama that are developed over time to meet their spiritual and social quest. Drama in Ebira language is called "*Ahee Irenuohine*." *Ahee* means play/performance (music, dance and drama) while the literal meaning of *Ireneuhine* is sweet mouth, playful or comic relief. I have to also state it that *Ireneuhine* is a compound of two words, *Irenu* meaning mouth, and *ohine* meaning sweet. The metaphoric meaning of *Ireneuhine* refers to jest, comedy or entertainment. Drama is a vital tool in the process of effecting positive change and transforming the society. However, it is considered a leisure act. In fact, the concept of *Ireneuhine* evolves from the notion that drama is the business of humorous and unserious-minded fellows who are in the habit of transforming serious issues into comedy to ridicule certain individuals or situation and to make people laugh. Thus, drama as a vital channel of creating awareness requires a mild entertaining approach that could deliver thought provoking messages. Though the

playful messages could be offensive to some members of the society that are guilty of the negative activities being exposed.

Ontology of Ebira Drama Culture

Indigenously, drama as a functional element of Ebira folklore could either exist within ritual and social contexts. Contents in Ebira drama are usually aimed at influencing morality, behavioural pattern of individual and the entire community. For example, I observe that the role of *Akatapa* masquerades during Ebira-Ekuechi ritual masquerade festival revolves around exposing evil doers in the community as well as imparting moral ethics. They display this act through satiric songs, chants, jest, rhetoric, dramatic and pantomimic dance movements that expose people's activities in the community. Ododo (2004, p. 118-119) affirms those *Akatapa* mask personages as the:

embodiment of the spirits of dead women who on this night unit as co-wives exchanging banter and throwing tantrums. This demonstrates the age-long rivalry envy found among co-wives in polygamous settings. They visit people from one house to another to moan, curse, praise or wail, depending on what they apprehend in each house. In the process, they satirize people in the commune who are known to have violated certain societal norms or moral codes, thereby providing leverage for social control. Their utterances are uncanny and prophetic. *Akatapa* jests and chant songs foretelling the arrival of the ancestors.

Ododo's detailed description of the dramatic relevance of *Akatapa* mask performers proves that drama has been an integral element in Ebira tradition and theatre culture within ritual and social context. It is a vital tool for societal transformation and development in all spheres of life. Also, music, dance and pantomime, play central

roles as potent vehicles of delivery in the hands of the performers. Drama is also enacted during other ritual festivals and performances such as *Echeori* festival, *Ozomeche and Anuva* dance performances (vocational musical dance), *Uru/Aheeo* (hunters ritual display) *Ogugu and Arigede* funeral rites, *Aare ongwu* (communal farming expedition), and community meetings, as well as at palm-wine joints as part of the merriment. Occasionally, entertaining dramatization of improvised plotted plays also comes to play to the amusement of community members at the village squares after harvest.

Socially, drama as a product of folklore is a specialized form of entertainment by which every given group of Anebira unwinds at various occasions. Drama/play performance otherwise known as *Ahee Irenuohine* among Anebira serves as a medium for cultural education and transmission, recreation and entertainment. Drama is usually enacted and improvised as part of folktale performance package at moonlight whereby members of the listening audience take turn to volunteer as characters to dramatize a given tale through mime, pantomime, dancing and singing. Osofisan (2004, p. 1) confirms my exposition of dramatic play performance in his assertion that “Most people who grew to maturity before the recent “TV Generation” recognize the subtle or even overt roles that the arts of story-telling, dance and music, mime and masking, have played in our rites of initiation, and in the process of our gradual integration into our communities as full-fledged citizens”. This form of indigenous recreation usually takes place at various locations, which includes home compounds, village arena and market, squares. The folk performances usually involve varieties composed of drumming, singing, dancing, story-telling, recalling proverbs and idioms as well as dramatizing tales. This art transcends the traditional era and setting into the contemporary times. Stylized Ebira drama also advanced with the changing times

whereby creative minded fellows started forming theatre groups that perform dramas at village arenas and market squares from one village/community/town to another.

Similar to the Yoruba travelling theatre and concert parties in the south west of Nigeria, these Ebira theatre groups no longer have to wait till a given traditional festival season or ceremonial context before they could display. They developed into professionals dramatizing moral issues and challenges affecting their various communities from place to place. Ebira drama and play performance follows the pattern of satiric comedy with heavy application of vocal and instrumental music and stylized dance movements. That is, unveiling and treating serious issues of life in a rather comic and satiric manner.

Ebira peoples contact with other cultures such as the Yoruba theatrical culture and the advent of western colonialism further influenced new innovations in Ebira folk theatre for development. Ebira folk drama advanced beyond village and community arenas into the Western educational schools instituted in Ebira communities. Pupils and students in schools were constantly involved in folk theatre performances that portrayed Ebira cultures ranging from masquerade, festival, music and dance performances to plotted legendary drama. These dramatic performances were performed in primary and secondary schools across Ebira communities during short leisure and tales’ hour in between lessons and closing time, games hour, end of term/session cultural displays, inter house and inter schools’ sports and cultural competitions. Here, youths experience a continuity and extension of their cultural folklores displayed in dance, vocal and instrumental music, tales, recitation/echo of proverbs and legendary drama performances at school.

The Place of Dance and Music in Ebira Theatre and Drama

The field of performing arts within traditional and modern context is made up of

tripartite elements, which include dance, music and drama. While the three composite elements co-exist in performance, each of the theatrical elements can also exist as an independent entertainment form. However, dance and music can be employed as accompaniment in drama. Dance and music can function as intro/opening glee, interlude and transition in drama. The duo is usually employed as a representational symbol and to sustain audience attention in the course of a drama performance. They are usually used to emphasize a particular idea, feeling or concept. Music and dance plays very important role in the constant enactment and transmission of Ebira culture from generation to generation. They form an integral part of the people's folklores, traditional norms and ethos. Music and dance permeate all spheres of Ebira traditions including ritual and social festivals, ceremonies and events.

Ebira historical past, present experiences and future projection are usually represented and transmitted through traditional music and dance forms. For example, the rudiment of *Ebira-Ichekene* dance movement portrays poise; elegance, respect, dignity and cautiousness derived from the Ebira popular greeting *Tangwao* meaning watch your steps, be careful and be steady and firm. The features of the dance steps can also be analyzed from the perspective of the tribe's name, *Ebira* which means character and a person of Ebira descent is called *Anebira* which invariably means a good character fellow or a virtuous person. In the same vein, Ebira traditional songs and chants are usually philosophical in content that expresses moral ethics and principles of life. Hence, whenever Ebira culture is re-enacted through dance and music performances, the people are constantly reminded of their identity, historical past. It also re-awakens them to the present and future, and consequences of not adhering to good moral ethics of life. Therefore, dance and music remain vital and relevant in drama and play performances because the messages they convey are easily

comprehended and remembered by all and sundry including the young and old members of the community.

Based on the foregoing, one can argue that dance and music are vehicles through which culture can be transmitted. They both function as effective tools for teaching and passing instructions, chastising, admonishing, correcting, praising or criticizing vices found within society. The end product of the role of dance and music in this case, is to effect a change in individual and the society at large. For instance, a recall of personal primary school experience in the 1970s was a situation where my class teacher at that time employed singing; clapping, dancing and dramatization to either correct or instruct a pupil or the entire class. There was a particular scenario when my teacher tapped into the fore mentioned creative elements to chastise a habitual dirty pupil who never brushed his teeth to school. The teacher and coordinator of the games and cultural display hour started his amusement by narrating a story of a dirty fellow who was turned back by his would-be mother in-law because the old woman could not bear the unpleasant odour that follow up when the fellow opened her mouth to greet. It is common among the leaders or elders to instruct anyone that is dirty to the extent of not washing his mouth to dance to the rhythm of a song thus:

Song in Ebira language: *Irenu chochocho, Irenu danguro, wakuonyiovawu danguro*

English translation: Rustic and smelly mouth, say a word of greeting to your mother in-law

Mattaga Theatre

The popular Ebira- Mattaga theatre was one of the professional travelling theatre groups that emerged in the wake of the advancement of Ebira folk drama and play performance. The Mattaga players usually employ a juxtaposition of satiric songs, dance and pantomime, punctuated drum beats, narrative folktales, proverbs and idiomatic

expressions, metaphoric characterization, sarcastic dialogues and comics to ridicule and expose certain bad characters and activities going on within their various communities and society at large. Mattaga theatre style was developed from the experience gathered over the years in indigenous story telling play session. Like every other modern African folk theatre, Mattaga drama performances are usually laced with eclectic innovations acquired from contact with other cultures and colonial influence. Ebira-Mattaga theatre was the equivalent of the likes of Ogunde concert party, Duro ladipo theatre, Moses Olaiya theatre to mention a few in the south west of Nigeria.

The Mattaga players were constantly moving from one village/ town to another, staging dramatic performances in the streets, village squares and arenas in a bid to morally transform Ebira society. They constantly introduce and adopt more creative skills as a good number of the group acquire western education. Some of them have gained employment as teachers, workers in the local councils, Railway Corporation and other organizations in many parts of Nigeria. They made a laudable advancement by documenting some of their play performances in audio record playback such as the popular comic play titled *Atabaamong* and some others. More recent Mattaga players were able to go beyond performing in an arena by producing the plays in audiocassette and turntable plates except that the absence of visual concealed the dance and pantomimic movements. However, the new generation Mattaga players and many other Ebira theatre groups have metamorphosed into using film and movie making equipment to achieve combination of sound and moving pictures on videocassettes and discs.

Mattaga Dramaturgy

Mattaga plays are characterized by narrative folktales, satiric humour and comedy and functional application of music and dance. Mattaga drama package is usually

a combination of comic dramatization of narrated tales and series of contemporary stories that treats issues affecting individual, homes and the society at large. The content of their performances usually satirizes the good and the bad in the society. That is, ridiculing and exposing the bad elements in the society. Mattaga's performance opening usually follows the pattern of narrative folktale involving symbolic human and animal characters.

The animal characters are projected as representational symbol of identifiable human characters in contemporary Ebira society. The stories revolve around thematic issues in all spheres of life. The performances unravel with the functional application of representational vocal songs and punctuated drumbeats, symbolic dance, pantomime, jest, proverbs and idiomatic expressions. Though, Mattaga plays are usually composed of series of comic play that provokes laughter but the contents treat serious issues of life as they affect individual and the society. These issues of life cut across various spheres as moral ethics, character, wickedness, pride, cheating, oppression, rebellion, poverty, affluence, destiny, fate, and consequence of laziness as well as the benefit of hard work among.

Mattaga's popular comic play titled *Ataba* is composed of series of dramatized tales that revolve around the consequences of bad company and character, waywardness, deceit and oppression. The play started with a musical opening glee that introduces an imaginary tale with a mixture of animal and human characters in a given community. After the opening session of highly electrifying drumbeat, call and response song and pantomimic dance movements, the narrator unveils the characters including pig, dove, cat and human beings. The narrator pursues at intervals to introduce a song to emphasize his point while the participating actors dramatizes the storyline, dance and chorus every introduced song. The pig was portrayed as an inconsistent fellow whose bad habits dented the images of his close

acquaintance and friends in person of dove and cat at various instances. The story is a reflection of the proverb, *show me your friend and I will tell you who you are*.

The animal characters in the community of human beings represent different personalities in the society that are involved in various negative activities resulting in societal decay. A representational call and response song and symbolic dance movements unveiling the consequence of bad habit and the danger of keeping bad company always follow the tale. The following scenes feature a dramatization of deceit, unfaithfulness and oppression existing between husband and wife, friends and acquaintances. One of the scenes features a selfish husband who came home with a cock and told his wife that a diviner revealed that women and children should henceforth stop consuming chicken meat. Thus, his wife then intentionally cooked the chicken meat with excessive amount of pepper. The selfish man was forced to stop eating when he tasted the chicken meal and discovers that it contained excessive amount of pepper. He cried and called out to his wife and children telling them the gods just whispered to him that women and children should partake of the chicken meal. The scene ends in a representational song and pantomimic dance movement as the actors' transit into a new issue and act. The actors at interval will introduce a song relating to the storyline and they will all chorus and dance in the course of an on-going dialogue and transition between series of stories and dramatized action.

The mentioned style of performance allows audience improvisational participation and as such sustains audience interest and attention. The audience will always yearn for more at the end of every scene of dramatization that includes singing, dancing, improvised dialogue and pantomime. Music and dance are employed in the performance to introduce every new storyline and scene, functions as interlude, transition and symbolic representation.

The impact of Mattaga style of play performance is that those who are guilty of the issues treated in the plays will always withdraw from the open whenever the representational songs are recalled as the audience mock the bad characters display in the symbolic dance movements. The result is that such guilty characters gradually experience moral transformation thereby purging the society of unethical and unhealthy activities.

Conclusion

The Mattaga plays serve as a potent and effective tool in the process of exposing societal ills and characters that are involved in negative activities within Ebira society and environs. They were able to impact the communities that constitute Ebira society with moral and ethical messages.

Mattaga Theatre for Development made laudable achievement through their juxtaposition of representational music, dance and comedy to create awareness and mobilize the society to uphold moral values and to work against evil activities. The content of their satiric drama usually leaves a lasting impression on both the young and the old members of the communities. While young people that have witnessed Mattaga plays in performance constantly display the symbolic dance and pantomimic drama at leisure, the representational songs and idiomatic expressions are usually echoed to criticize and correct rebellious fellows at home and community of people.

Mattaga theatre inspired and motivated the emergence of more Anebira theatre groups such as Amedari theatre, Omeduta theatre, Ajoze theatre among others. It also inspired and Ebira moviemakers such as Attila and Calabash production companies among others. Both the theatre and moviemakers are joining the process of purging and transforming the prevalence of moral decadence and societal decay through the wheel of Ebira folk theatre performance. The various Ebira theatre groups and moviemakers have been able to

manoeuvre the challenges of little or no exposure, lack of finance, absence of formal training and lack of up-to-date sophisticated state of art film and movie making equipment. They have metamorphosed from the phase of poorly produced domestic home video and movies to developing unimaginable techniques and acquisition of movie making cameras, lighting and editing machines to achieve presentable productions.

The home coming and presence of well trained, exposed and experienced indigenous performing artistes and film makers of Ebira decent such as Edward Jatto among others have equally added a boost with the transference of their formal training and exposure to the efforts of the home based. The emergence and development of technology in the packaging and projection of works of arts is a boost to the theatre and has yielded great gains. However, technology has on the other hand has made many Anebira jettison the qualities of lifelikeness and immediacy present in life theatre performance. Life theatre targeted at effecting certain changes among indigenous communities such as those that constitute Ebira society, gives room to audience participation. As such, audience feels a sense of responsibility towards the process of development in their given communities and society. Moreover, the complementing co-existence of life stage theatre and theatre on screen in a changing world will yield greater gain in the development of our society at large.

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