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Contextualization of African Traditional Drama: A Study of Owu Festival of Amimo Etiti Omuma

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Abstract
This discourse, Contextualization of African Traditional Drama: A Study of Owu Festival of Amimo Etiti Omuma, Imo State examines Owu Festival as a dramatic work within its context. It attempts to place it side by side with any other dramatic work elsewhere, with the core elements of drama inherent in the festival. The core elements of drama are examined in this study, and they are character/characterisation, stage and audience, which bring together all other elements such as costume, setting, plot etc . The theory used in this study is culturalism. The researcher relied on interviews, observation, discussions, audience participation during the festival and library materials in conducting this research. The necessity of this research lies in the fact that traditional festivals are gradually going into extinction; therefore, such should be documented for the coming generation. The researcher realized that Owu festival has several acts and scenes, different spaces of performances, characters, audience, setting, and climax, so it is a complete dramatic work when measured with all of these elements and placed in its origin.

Keywords: Contextualizing, Drama, Owu, Culturalism, Festival, Characters

Introduction

Traditional Drama is an integral aspect of oral literature which is a creative expression that pre-exists written literature in all civilizations of the world. It unveils the concrete experiences of people in their respective primordial communities. It is perceptible that the invention of written codes did not initiate man's creative and imaginative response to his environment. Therefore, man in his yearnings to lucid and project their cultural tenets, norms, beliefs and other issues in his society employed oral literature as a means of verbal and non-verbal communication.

Oral literature implies the transmission of cultural materials by words of mouth via direct contact from one person to another and from generation to generation. It is greatly dependent on memories, habits, thoughts, actions, performances and speeches for continuity, and it is communally owned. Oral literature is not only known as what is spoken but also of what is acted out on a stage, which involves body movements, gestures, dances and other physical displays. What is known today as oral literature has different genres, such as folktales, ballad and songs, epic narrative, myths and legends, riddles, proverbs, recitations and chants, orations, tongue twister, ritual performance, narrative or epic drama, ceremonial or civic drama, state occasions, ritual drama, festival drama or secular drama and magical plays. All of these genres of oral literature can be categorised basically into two group based on their mode of expressions: what is spoken with the words of mouth to an audience (folktales, ballad, songs, epic narrative, myths, legend, riddles, proverbs, recitation, chants and tongue twister) and what is acted before an audience (ritual performance, narrative or epic drama, ceremonial or civic drama, state occasions, ritual drama, festival drama or secular drama and magical plays).

The above genres of oral literature show that what is acted before people (drama) has been an essential aspect of oral literature which

is a significant artistic convention that pervades the different continents of the world as a literary form. It is communicated not only through oral renditions as songs or speeches in a performance, but also through the exhibitions of various dramatic features performed before an audience. Kumba, posits that, 'virtually all oral forms possess dramatic elements, and are actualized only through performance before a live audience' (4). The cravings to use oral forms to portray issues in human society are inherent in man, irrespective of his colour, status, beliefs and other things. It is very comprehensible that down the history of man on earth, man uses this tool to discuss, to learn, to entertain and also it is a vital part of his rituals and religions. Nwafor asserts that, 'Any event or episode which is expressed through elaborate gesture and dialogue as ways of capturing reality can be considered as drama' (22).
This event could be spoken or acted in a certain stage which is a type found in festival drama either in the African continent or elsewhere in the world.

Drama as one of the oldest genres of literature has navigated many literary periods and these periods have prompted to the production of great dramatic works and literary artists. Though some periods of literary histories have produced many works more than others and many scholars have examined the social, historical and religious situations of these ages. Drama since the great age of the Greeks down to the contemporary has its origin from festivals, hence Clark in Akporobaro asserts that, "… as the roots of European drama go back of the Egyptian Osiris and the Greek Dionysius, so are the origins of drama likely to be found in the early religious and magical ceremonies and festivals of the people of this country" (467**).**
Further on this origin of drama Emeka Nwabueze in Anthonia Ezeugo joins his voice to affirm that:

> The starting point of dramatic art took place one day in the sixth century B.C. The -major activity of the vintage season was to assembly to give thanks to the

> god, Dionysius. On that fateful day, many citizens of Athens numbering more than fifteen thousand, and dressed in their best tunics were happily seated in the theatre of Dionysius, an Acropolis, the tallest hill in Athens…since the performers had to dance and sing songs of praises to Dionysius, the Greek god of wine and fertility. (11).

Generally drama from different scholars has its myth and its origin which is usually traceable to religious activities and festivals, in African it cannot be of a different origin. Festival drama is a form of oral literature which reveals, celebrates, fabricates, mimics, imitates and expresses the cultural essence of man or an act of presentation which must be acted on stage. Since dramatic works are embodiments of man and the issues that surround his environments; therefore, it should not in any way be isolated from its origin and cannot be judged with the standard of another dramatic work elsewhere or in another environment.

The essential contents or elements of drama are characters/ characterization, represented by players or actors; action described by gestures and movements, dialogue, words and actions, spectacle, represented by scenery, music, and costume, plot which is the chronological sequence of the actions that makes up a particular dramatic representation and finally audience who respond to these actions of the actors. It is an experience that the audience participates at the same time the actors are on a stage performing as Chinyere Okafor states the three core elements of drama that bring every other aspect of drama together.

> The core of drama has three basic elements: performers engaged in mimetic action, spectators, and place of representation (which can be either indoors or outdoors). All other elements, costume, scenery, dialogue, mine, and special effects mighty aid the performers imitative action… they are extrinsic

characterisations that determine the peculiarity of different dramatic traditions (3) .

These simultaneous actions are possible because both the actors and the audience are participating at the same time and in the same environment in Traditional Drama. On one hand, it is believed that what is happening on the stage is happening real while on the other hand, it is only a make-belief. Festival drama emphasizes a certain degree of precision, through dexterous people who belong to the group of artists within the festival performance, who must cooperate with the audience. To attain an excellent performance by the artist, audience participation is needed in festival drama. Drumming, dancing and singing are major elements of festival drama, and these are most times accompanied by acrobatic displays, wise sayings, imitations and puns.

All of these features are what bring this shared relationship between the actors and the audience to achieve great enactment. The whole of these aspects are targeted towards entertainment, ethical and social functions. They are all found in the Owu Festival, since entertainment, according to Akporobaro is very essential to human development as recreation after a hard day's work, as a means to remove boredom, to alleviate stress and sorrow and as a time-filler. In most traditional societies in around the world, festival drama is essential aspect of their social, ethical and religious lives, where the oral artist is anticipated to teach the societal norms and values to the upcoming generations and remind the older generations about its social and political needs and among other things entrenched in oral literature. It is performed or celebrated for a reason within a given society, and the continent of Africa is one of the continents of the world that houses the best dramatic manifestations and performances, especially within these indigenous traditional festivals, dances, masquerades and songs.

Scholars like Biodun Joyifo, J.P Clark, Femi Osafian, Wole Soyinka and others, affirm through their various critical works that

the African continent has her indigenous traditional drama prior to the introduction of Western influence and its type of written literature instead of the oral performances which are obtainable in African society. Akporobro summaries what is traditional drama as:

> Any gathering, social, clan or religious group has in it the ingredients and elements of theartre and drama, since it entails the communication of something, to a people. It means that burial ceremony, marriages ceremonies, initiations, the installation of kings or Oba or Chief has the elements drama provided it contains the elements of arts and performance (464).

All these genres of traditional performances integrate character, dance, plot, stage, audience, setting, costume and others. It is these elements of drama that form the Crux of this study on the Owu Festival of Amimo Etiti Omuma in Oru Local Government Area, Imo State, as a Traditional Drama.

It is unfortunate that despite the rich, dramatic elements inherent in the Owu festival, not much has been written about it. This lack of academic attention could be because the elders who are in the position to relate major information about the festival are not always willing to relate them to the uninitiated members either from the community or elsewhere. Regardless of the rich dramatic and beauty of this festival this reason has been hampering factors to researchers, hence, the researcher handles this obstacle by investigating into the activities and performances of the Owu festival as a Traditional Drama to explore its dramatic elements.

This discourse aimed at examining the Owu Festival to find out its dramatic relevance in African context. This is also to balance an argument that has been on for decades that there is no drama in pre-colonial Africa society. The core elements of drama: performers, spectators and place of presentation are all embedded in the Owu festival to settle the arguments. It is also aimed at

filling the gap of the scarcity of documented materials on the Owu festival. The purposes are outlined as follows:

i To demonstrate the entertainment and relaxation values of the Owu Festival to Amimo Obinato community

ii To establish the various ways through which the festival fits into traditional African Drama.

Conceptual Review

Traditional drama is defined as a stylish imitation of an action significant to the African person and his environment, which involves physical representations of characters through rudiments of music, song, dance and gesticulations, mime, dialogue and others. Nchikogwa outlines forms of African drama as follows: narrative or epic drama, ceremonial or civic drama, state occasions, ritual drama, festival drama, dance or secular drama and magical plays. He states the importance of African Traditional Drama to the continent thus: robust entertainment, occasion for the meeting of true sons and daughters, fosters relationships, serves as advertisement for the community's artists, serves as a record of origin of people, representatives of gods and spirits, social and civic functions, a vehicle for social comments and satire, atonement and purification, a period of thanksgiving and a time to give out prophesies.

Liz Gunner also agrees on the importance of traditional drama, he affirms that 'Orality was a means by which Africa made its existence, its history long before the colonial and imperial presence of the west manifested itself' (69). Festival celebration in Africa is not just only a means of entertainment and relaxation but it is an all-inclusive celebration.

Ogunba cited by Ahmadu states that:

> Traditional African festival is that which has in it the process of arts, of costuming, masking, drumming, chanting, dancing, and several others which are all utilized to bring out its dramatic nature. The other

> festival which he refers to as a religious communion is the ceremony in which everybody participates and that which does not admit spectators (98).

Traditional drama has been the same in all civilisations of the world as oral tradition. In Europe, it evolved from the Greek worship of gods which started as a religious festival in honour of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and fertility. The festival drama in Igbo land (Africa) cannot be separated from the traditional and religious ceremonies of the continent.

J P Clark posits that as the roots of European theatre can be traced to the Egyptians Osiris and the Greek Dionysus so are the origins of drama likely to found in the early religious and magical ceremonies and festival of the people (57).

According to Nchikogwa:

> Early African drama consisted of primitive rites of songs and dances especially in connection with agricultural activities cantering on vegetation deities of fertility and transitional rites of birth coming of age and death or even war. Festival drama is a religious festival for the gods, meteorological-based festivals for season; commemorative festivals of ancestors and historical events (153).

Duruaku points out that African Traditional Drama refers to indigenous African performing art is form that has not been corrupted by modernization over the years. This includes those found in festivals, which combine dance, songs, music, chants, speech/dialogue, and spectacle (34).

Francis affirms that 'African Traditional Drama is therefore realized in the form of a carnival, and comes alive mostly in festivals and such like ceremonies with which a lot is actually communicated outside verbal utterance and in symbolic language' (124).

Drama exist in different forms depending the environments it is found and to analyse such drama should not be based on another

standard but with the standard of the origin of such dramatic work. Social context of a work is very crucial in defining any work of Art. Since Art does not exist in a vacuum but for the societal relevance of the people that have it. Among the three genres of literature, drama is the most pleasurable in Africa because all Africa performances are dramatic in nature.

Ola Rotimi expresses the feature of imitation in African traditional drama as 'Some African ceremonies reveal instance of imitation either of an experience in life or of the behaviour patterns of some powers. Others merely re-present certain powers without the mimetic impulse to recreate the ways and details of those powers. (34) In European standard of what drama is as stated by Aristotle that imitation of actions which could be the one of human or spirit. Most festivals in Africa usually replicate the activities of the gods just like in Owu festival the princess of Owu (Ada Owu) who imitates the river goddess. Lee Jacobus views 'Traditional Yoruba drama develops from religious celebrations and annul festivals and includes music and dance.' (886). He further acknowledged that some non-European drama depends on interpretation of local myth in relation to the culture that produces it.

These views are convincing that drama consists of complete actions that will involve actors, which imitates specific action through the instrumentality of masks, costume and music, song, dance. Thus, with the words of Chinweizu et al buttress more that 'What is called drama today is 'The rowdy activities of a festival might develop into a dramatic form' (16).

Theoretical Framework

The theory the researcher adopted is culturalism and it was propounded by Franz Boas as the first generation scholar of culturalism while Benedict continued from the point where Boas stopped. It is one of the cultural studies that believes that literary critics must not only study the cultural artefacts within the

aesthetic realm of work, rather they must be studied within its contexts or environments. A literary work must be read and analysed not only within the common conventions and history of the novel, drama or poetry but within the cultural context of the literary work. Culturalism consists in determining their disproportions emphasizing boundaries and different identities. It believes that each culture has its own dignity, norms, value of thoughts and it is holistic and it requires domestication of literary works within culture(s) of its existence.

Drama emanates from the environmental, ecological and cultural factors peculiar to a people. Uprooting traditional drama from its milieu and subjecting it to alien analytical postulates will not only bring distortions to the form and structure of traditional drama but also its content and perceptive modes must be affected also. Further on this note, it is like searching for the living among the dead. Therefore, this theory is interested in the lifestyle of a society, everyday life, defines identity, influences social relations and bestows meaning and value to artefacts in a culture.

Culturalism determines individuals in a given society or community. It is on this point that this research studies Owu Festival not as a cultural material only but also as dramatic work within the African context. Secondly, culturalism is used to analyse Owu festival as drama within its cultural context in which it is located in contrast to the views of some critics that believe there is no drama unless it is a written drama. The greatest misconception of the criticism on traditional drama is to view it in the perspective of written literary standard without considering the language, behavioural patterns and environmental circumstances of the context.

Dramatic or theatrical experiences are not lacking in the traditional society in the pre-writing society because both the performance of griots, dancers, plays and festivals are all dramatic in nature in all

ramifications. In fact, some communal activities are dramatic which if well studied and analysed can stand side by side with any dramatic work in any part of the world

Elements of Drama in the Owu Festival

Character and characterisation is one of the major elements of a dramatic piece, it is the representation of persons, other beings or creatures in a literary work. The representation may include direct methods like the attribution of qualities in description or commentary, and indirect dramatic methods inviting readers to deduce qualities from characters via actions, dialogue or appearance. Agbada Nwachukwu et al defines characterisation as 'the reader's understanding of the personality of each character as gleaned from character's physical descriptions and actions, as well as from comments provided by other characters and by the narrator of the events being recounted' (14).

Therefore, a drama is centred on the characters' appearances (the plot), what they do, say or think within the context of a drama. Characterisation is used to transmit information about the thoughts, histories, and dreams of a character(s), without drifting away from the action. The way a character speaks or appears can portray his background and personality, his educational status, emotional state and others. There are several characters that participate in Owu Festival such as the Dancers (Okorosha), Princess of Owu, (Ada Owu), Seer (Ohuzo), the Head of Owu (Onye isi Owu), masquerades (Nwaudo or Nwaloyio) and other initiated members.

All of these are the names of several characters that participate in this festival. These characters perform at various points of the celebration. All of them perform in the public except one, the seer (Ohuzo) who usually performs in the night. He is not meant to be seen by women and the uninitiated members of the community except the initiated members of the festival. One major elements of a dramatic work of all ages has been the stage, in fact, what

qualifies any literary work to be called drama is that it must be acted on a stage. It has been what characterized dramatic works of all the ages. It is a place where people come together to watch a performance and the place must be set aside. It is usually a known place for the stakeholders of the performance. As Akporobaro asserts that "A stage specifically designed for the purpose of performance or enactment is also a necessary feature of the notion of drama and theatre in the western mind" (62). The stage (Ekweje) is the place where the initiated, Princess of Owu, Head of Owu, masquerades and the audience gather for the purpose of the festival. *Ekweja Umuorie* is a representation of the modern stage**.** Masquerade is the only character(s) that perform briefly at the *Ekweje* but it regularly appears and performs at what Meki Nzewi in Janeth Ogbalu calls 'liquid theatre' (47).

The masquerades move from one part of the community to another. It does not have a specific location for its performance. This Ekweje (a place of showcasing your skills) is located at the entrance to the house of the chief priest of 'Afo Ama' which is one of the major deities of the Amimo Etiti Omuma. And there are trees planted at this *Ekweja* that serve as a shield to the stage for the performance of this festival. Usually before the main day of the festival, seats will be kept in cycle to form a round arena and a space for the drummers and the performers. Then, the audience will stand at the back of the seats kept round the stage and the seats are kept for the elderly male members who are the custodians of the festival. They sit on those seats to participate in the festival and also to watch what is going on within the stage. They equally monitor when any uninitiated member of the community comes on stage to perform.

But the celebration this year 2022 according to Mr. Toochukwu Nwokehugha Nneji says that:

> the venue for the three main days of the performances have been decentralized because the Amimo-Obinato

community has grown too large that *Ekweje Umuoroire* is no longer enough to accommodate the audience and also the cry of marginalization from the Ubahaegwogwo village. All of these reasons have made the elders of the community to split the festival into two different venues but the same day, under the one Owu head, one Owu Princess and different Okorosha even though a particular okorosha may decide to participate in two different venues or may decide to settle for any venue of his choice. Therefore, there are two venues for Owu of Amimo Etiti, one at the *Ekweje Umuorie* and *Ama Dogo* for the second venue.

Plot is another element of drama that embraces the events that make up a story or drama, particularly as these events relate to one another in a pattern, or in a sequence, as they also relate to each other through cause and effect (www.google.com.ng/search-plotintdrama&clien).

The classical theory of drama entails that the plot of a play should have a beginning which gives some form of exposition, a middle which consists of the major events that lead to the complications, and finally the end that gives some kind of resolution which Owu festival has a similar plot. The plot of drama contributes enormously to the thematic development of the story, and the emphasis mostly falls on causality. It is the major shifts in the actions or performances of the festival; it is the sequence of events that gives coherence and movement towards a given end in a dramatic work. This could be seen as a detailed arrangement of incidents for maximum meaning which is aimed at entertaining the audience

There are major events in Owu Festival that relate directly or indirectly to the central theme of the festival. The festival is programmed to last at most for one month and two weeks and it is embellished with lots of events that keep unfolding till the end of

the festival. The festival starts from the point of initiating the festival by the Onye isi Owu with the approval of the priest of *Afoama* deity, (Ito nkwa) which involves a lot of rituals. Then the Ito nkwa keeps the children and the women in the community busy before the main day of the celebration. The main event of the festival happens for two days but the masquerade performances continued till after one week the celebration of the festival. The arrangement of the major events of the festival is as follows:

There is no dramatic work without an audience, it is a group of people who watch, listen and participate during a given performance. There is a mutual relationship between the characters and the audience. It is this relationship that makes a dramatic performance a complete event. The audience's contributions to the festival starts from the day of initiation of 'emume Owu' till the last day of the festival as .Adedeji opines that 'African theatre audiences do not want to be passive. Oral tradition provides them with the direct means of vicarious participation in the production…they react to lines, often join in the songs….and sometimes move in rhythm to the action on stage.' (147)

Audience in Owu festival are not silent and inactive observers but active and participatory audience. In fact, the audience in Owu festival apart from cheering up the okorosha that is on the stage can also jump into the stage to introduce comic relief and continue from where a particular okorosha (dancer) of his interest stopped.
The audience watches and appraises the performances of the actors/characters and eventually benefits from it in numerous ways. They take their designated positions around the stage to watch and listen to the actors in drama presentation. There is nothing like a drama presentation without the audience or spectators since what make drama are the actions presented on a stage. The great affinity between the audience and the actors in emume Owu contributes to the suspense and comic-relief of the festival. The major thing that enhances this feeling of affinity is the

arena which is within the familiar village square. The village square is communally owned and one would assume that whatever that will bring people together to a village square should be of great importance and interest in which all should participate fully and be entertained. It is a means of relaxation, recreation and entertainment. Male and female, old and young, educated and uneducated, the rich and the poor, initiated and uninitiated participate in this festival.

Audience as one of the basic components of drama is active in Owu festival. Usually oral performance is a direct delivery to the audience. It is often involved in the actualization and recreation of a performance. The entertainer is usually receptive to the audience's reactions, expectations, and cultural assumptions. Unlike the writer, the performer in Owu festival has the audience at the moment of creation that reacts to the displays on stage. Just like most traditional African festivals, the audience are the participating one. They are part of the community and also the active performers. Members of the audience come and go at will depending on force of spontaneity wrought by the tempo, rhythm, and inspiration experienced by the audience. The uninitiated and initiated members of the community that make up the audience of this festival sometimes react to the songs by nodding their heads, clap their hands in appreciation and they can even spread money on the actors. The initiated members who are moved can equally interrupt the dance and display some acrobatic performances that may earn him some applause from the rest of the audience. This applause can also include money which will be thrown at the actors because the show is free, there is nothing like gate fee and the appreciation is not a compulsory one. All the active members do not see it as a means of making money rather an avenue of entertaining the members of the community**.**

Costume design in dramatic enactment is the conventional usage of clothing to better the general appearance of a performer in a

particular performance, depicting a particular personality, historical period, status and occupation. It helps distinguish one group from another, separating minor characters from major ones in dramatic involvement. It is a major aspect in dramatic works since drama is an embodiment of imitation. It helps in real imitation or impersonation of a particular character. It also makes the identity of an actor to be hidden, physical appearance of an actor also enhances greatly in mimicking the character of person as Utoh-Ezeajugh explains that costume and make-up are:

> ...the visual elements in any traditional African performance. They are the effects used to transform a dancer, singer, drummer, bride, groom and any other performer or participant in any of the numerous festivals, into the image or character they are to portray. Before costumes and make-up activate the society and played similar roles in the life of the people as they do in the theatre. They constitute an essential part of the people's heritage. (83)

The decorative arrangements in emume Owu aim at aesthetic and it equally adds some dramatic disguise and costume to suit the dramatic performance of the festival and what it stands for. The Princess of Owu imitates the river goddess and because of her crucial role in the festival, she wears make-up to resemble the river goddess. Izenor posits that 'Make-up in theatre performance can be said to be any given material used by actors for the sole purpose of taking on the appearance that is usually appropriate to the role or characters being staged in a performance or any theatre impersonation.' (78)

The combination of these dramatic elements is what bring outs the pleasurable and moralistic aspects of Owu festival as a drama. John Dryden, a play wrights and critic in his view on what is drama, in Emeka Nwabueze states that 'A play ought to be a just and lively image of human nature and reproducing the passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject,

for the delight and interaction of mankind' [17]. This discourse demonstrated that the Owu festival, like any other traditional festivals in Igbo land, is a significant cultural practice that is enriched with elements and contents of what is termed drama today such as character, stage, plot, setting and dance. It is believed that Owu festival is an offshoot of beliefs and traditions of the community, thereof, this makes it communally owned and serves other the purposes.

The Owu festival, akin to any form of cultural expression, is based on the people's world view and aesthetics. This is because Owu festival derives its nature and value from the environment in which it is performed. This study has also established that virtually every aspect of Owu festival has audiences who watch performer's elaborate procession, dance, masquerade performances, the seer's movement, as well as display of the groit who sings the song of Owo (Agugu Owu or Abu Owu). It is also clearly stated in this that audience in African Traditional Drama are not just fans that only observe the performers rather an active audience who can jump into the scene because of the displays of a particular okorosha to stop a dancer in order to appreciate him. Owu festival is audience participatory in nature which is a common factor in traditional drama.

The festival drama does not only project the people's worldview and identity, the dramatic elements which were identified are costume, audience and dance, character, setting, and the stage. These elements were carefully analysed based on the data collected from field work carried out for this research.

Conclusion

This research has revealed that Owu festival is an African Traditional Drama that can stand side by side with any dramatic work elsewhere in the world. Furthermore, the illumination on various dramatic contents/elements of the Owu festival provide new ideas and insights that can generate further research into Owu festival beyond one community to the entire communities that celebrate Owu festival in Oru East Local Government Area in Imo

State. Or one can equally study the different variants of Owu songs from different groits in different communities. It is also very clear from this study that the audience in Owu festival is participatory in the performance in all aspects unlike the written drama that is purely on acting out written scripts.

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