

TOMBIANA EGBELEGBE MASQUERADE PERFORMANCE, AS A MEANS OF CULTURAL PRESERVATION

Somieari Jariel Ikiroma-Owiye PhD

Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

somieari.ikiroma-owiye@uniport.edu.ng

Abstract

Life of man on earth is coordinated, controlled, preserved, promoted, and transmitted from generation to generation through cultural festival performance process in the sense of per formative learning by rote, oratory, griot, music, dance, masquerade display as experienced in the Tombiana Ekine Egbelegbe masquerade festival in the Degema Local Government Area of Rivers State in Nigeria. The research method for this study is qualitative, while the methods of data collection will entail the primary and secondary methods of data collection. The theoretical framework is based on Richard Sechecher, s Performance Theory. The findings show that these social events are means of cultural preservation transmitted through performance which in a sense is drummed language of communication, embodies the narrative history of the culture and tradition of the people. The language of performance Ekine drum language is spoken and understood by initiated indigenes and elders of society. Language which is the major means of communication can come in varying forms; verbal, non-verbal, Spoken, chanted, sung, drummed. Recommendations Cultural performance ranges from birth death, planting, harvest, purification, initiation, coronation all in the life of the African is hinged on performance which is accompanied with drums, music, dance, chants, ululations, invocations acrobatics; that is it embraces a total theatrical performance process orchestrated by the drummed language of communication which needs to be encouraged by being inculcated into the educational curriculum because it preserves the peoples culture by creating peace, harmony and conviviality in African societies.

Keywords

Culture,

Language,

Preservation Promotion,

Development,

Ekine,

Performance.

1. Introduction

Cultural performance is the primary means of education and cultural preservation in pre-colonial African societies. Thus study examines how the Egbelegbe festival performance serves as a means of cultural education and preservation among the Tombia people in the Degema Local Government Area of Rivers State in Nigeria. Egbelegbe performance uses the drum language of communication as the primary means of information dissemination as evidenced in the chief drummer's control of dissemination of information, language of performance, script, and storyline as deciphered from the his drum lore tones.

Egbelegbe performance which is an aspect of Ekine drama has been identified as a form of masquerade drama practiced among the Ijaws in Rivers State of Nigeria in which the drum language of communication is central. Lack of empirical examination has necessitated a loss of performance details on drum lore tones, as the loss or demise of a master drummer without proper documentation of the drum language details creates a lacuna in continuity of cultural education preservation of the performance process.



Plate 1. Sibinume Egbelegbe's mother teaching girls how to carry themselves culled from field work 2014.

This gap created in terms of documenting, analyzing, the all-embracing coordinating, controlling and directorial functions of the chief drummer in his use of the drum language to preserve, dictate, coordinate, control the performance process have led to the notion that traditional African theatre has no sense of script, storyline, language, direction or directing in a performance. To this Johannes Fabian contends that western thought see the cultural educational practices of the developing world as a threat to the dominance of Europe in academics and scholarship thus delimiting African civilizations contribution to world body of knowledge need to be dismissed. Barthes; 'who in his analysis of narrative in cultural performance explains that the narratives of the world are numberless. 'Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man's stories.' Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting ... stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor have been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives ... Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, trans-historical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself (as cited in Czamlawska, 2004). Turner (1993, p. 68), furthermore in his discourse on narratives in cultural performance explains that; *Narrative can be described as a means of making sense of our social world, and sharing that 'sense' with others ... Its universality underlies its intrinsic place in human communication 'of which every society has developed its own style over the years that are meaningful in their performance culture.*

This brings us to the Schechner's theory which sees cultural performance as relative in nature. Richard Schechner (1973, 9. 5-6), in his article "Drama, script, theatre and performance" explaining the role and functionality of performance in society opines that;

Altogether to "theatre" and "performance." Before attempting a concrete, tax-onomical presentation of these words I must acknowledge the difficulty of using them. Words like "script," "drama," "theatre," and "performance" are loaded, and none have neutral synonyms. We know nothing of the scripts used by the dancer-shamans of the Palaeolithic temple-theatres. I don't say 'texts,' which mean written documents. I say 'scripts, which mean something that pre- exist any given enactment, which act as a blue print for enactment, and which persists from enactment to enactment.

Which in ekine drama is embedded in the drummed language of communication as ushered by the chief drummer embodying the story, language and dialogue in dramatic communication transmitting the peoples knowledge systems from generation to generation.

Culture

Culture is a fundamental human phenomenon of which every society preserves the best that is known and thought as a human attribute that differentiates it from other cultures in the comity of nations. Culture is relative and dynamic, which sums all about any given societies interactive and educational practices. The issues of cultural relativity and ethnocentrism have divided scholars of modern cultural practices.



Plate 2 The chief drummer disseminating dramatic dialogue culled from field work 2014

This has led to the misconceptions of traditional African drama not having recognition as having organization, direction, language, script or dialogue in its performance process by some scholars of African theatre (Ikiroma-Owiye 2007). These varying contending positions are the results of cultural relativism, diversity, identity, nationalism; which however sometimes is based on the ideological leanings of scholars and critics of traditional festival African theatrical practices. Which embody the history culture and traditions of the people? However concerning the practicability and functionality of African drama in terms of preservation, coordination, narration and who is in charge, or who controls, dictates and directs the performance process there are varying contending positions.

This issue has arisen as a result of the perception by anthropologists and sociologists who were the earliest documentarians of African culture, who had no in-depth knowledge of the recorded culture's dramatic practices because of cultural ethnocentrism as not having storyline and language of communication. While some scholar's like Richard Schechner, Richard Wagner, Johannes Fabian, etc. are objective in their conception that dramatic art in the world, is relative by broadening the intellectual space to accommodate new ideas of communication in performance studies. Scholars like Finnegan (1970), Echeruo (1981) etc., have argued along western and colonial lines.

These scholars reduce theatre performance and communication to the scripted text thus neglecting performances that have tonal communication as not developed by having written script or dialogue or being a form of drama. They also contend that African culture has not developed enough to have theatre/drama, let alone script or language of communication in the performance or dramatic process. But some other scholars on African culture and dramatic practices like Amankulor (1981), Nzewi (1980), Adedeji (1986), Krama (2001), Bell-Gam (2003), Ododo (2004), Adeoye (2010), Emasealu (2010), theatre and drama as relative to the performing culture. In this sense they see African theatre as complete in itself upholding the view that, Africa housed the best experience of theatre ever practiced in the world, of which modern African drama is a carryover from traditional dramatic practices. Like Egungun, Alarinjo Kwaighir, Yakamanchi, Ekine, Ekpe, Ekpo, etc. whose performance process are embedded with tonal communication. For example a critical analysis of this phenomenon of drummed narrative reenactment reveals that Ekine (African) drama as a form of masked African traditional drama has a special language of narration which is centrally controlled and disseminated in the drum lore tones of the chief drummer. In this guise the drum lore tone contains the story behind the performance, which in a sense is made up of legends, myths, folklore and history of the people all embedded in 'the drum language of communication.

Language

The language of communication in Ekine drama is a communally integrated work, coordinated by the chief drummer which also dictates, and controls dramatic composition, movement, rhythm, picturerization, and pantomimic dramatization which are basic fundamentals of performing theatre, as evident in Ekine drama performance. This study will decipher how the chief drummer in Kalabari society is instilled by cultural dictates to function as an encyclopedia/ text narrator, master communicator, informer, dictator, and all-round i.e. omniscient performer director in social and dramatic circumstances. The chief drummer prior to the

performance also uses the drum language to coordinate the rehearsal process and the performance proper as the drummer is ever present calling for rehearsals, coordinating the rehearsals and directing affairs in performance.

Ekine masquerade drama performances make sense to the dramatic characters and the audience as they know the story behind each performance, which they might have been told by their parents, uncles, aunts, or elders in the family as a narrative transmission of the embodiments of cultural mythology, and cosmology of the people. But Ekine drama has not been dramatically or critically reviewed from its cultural perspective but judged from an anthropological, sociological and historical documentation point of view. This we have evidenced in the documentation of African (Ekine) performance culture where the anthropologist Jones (1963), and Horton (1968) documented Ekine performance culture for posterity even though their works were bereft of critical performance dramaturgy. Thus we see works of scholars on masquerade performance not examining the use of language and the role of the various characters that make a dramatic production possible, like the director, language and dialogue/script of the performance and who coordinates or exercises preeminent control in developing dramatic process especially critically examining the role of the chief drummer in a performance like Ekine drama. Finnegan (1970, p. 467-468) in asserting the communicational nature of drummed communication says that;

A remarkable phenomenon in parts of west and central Africa is the literature played on drums and certain other instruments... the instruments themselves are regarded as speaking and their messages consist of words. Such communication, unlike that through conventional signals, is intended as a linguistic one; it can only be fully appreciated by translating it into words and any musical effects are purely incidental.

Thus the drum language is not intended for musical effects only but plays a central role in communal social functions and performance culture of the people and serves as the language of communication in dance, festivals, initiation, marriage, burial, and masquerade theatre performance of which it also embodies the language, script/drama of the performance. Even in terms of narration, one of the most quoted utterances proclaiming the central role of narratives in human social performance function in life comes from the French semiologist and theorist, and literary critic Barthes; 'who in his analysis of narrative in cultural performance explains that;

The narratives of the world are numberless. 'Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man's stories.' Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting ... stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives ... Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, trans-historical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself (as cited in Czamlawska, 2004).

This phenomenon of tonal narrative in cultural performance is embedded in the drum lore tones of the chief drummer in Ekine drama which is a natural phenomenon in African cultures South of the Sahara. The use of the drum language in communication is evident in most African societies and every oral culture without an orthographic tradition in the world though deciphered in differing forms. Based on this observation I agree with Barthes opinion, as he had seen narrative not confined to only one culture but a relative universal phenomenon which can be perceived in the cultural performances of all peoples of the world either in written, spoken, chanted, danced, masked, or musical drama performance forms 'through which people learn their culture. In furtherance of this view of the universality of dramatic/ performance culture narratives in the world Turner (1993, p. 67), also observes vividly while describing cultural narrative in relation to dramatic performance of 'traditional societies especially in Asia and Africa thus;

Some societies may have no equivalent to the novel, but all societies tell stories. Story telling can take many forms- myths, legends, ballads, folk-tales, rituals, dance, histories, novels, jokes, drama- and can be seen to have many apparently difficult social functions- from entertainment to religious construction it seems that story telling is part of our cultural experience, inseparable from and intrinsic to it.

This clearly depicts that every culture/society learns through story telling about the past exploits of their ancestors which they narrate to their forebears, through a chosen form of language or narrative; conversant with the culture concerned which most times in Ekine dramatic convention are embedded in drum lore tones ushered by the chief drummer which serves as the communal script of masquerade performance. These communal scripts contain the reenacted story of the ancestors which is dramatized as a representation of ancestral spirits or in the words of Nzewi 'spirit 'manifests.' These spirit manifests are representatives of the ancestor's whose stories and past exploits are reenacted by actors in a dramatic performance.

Preservation and Promotion

The best approach to tonal cultural performance preservation and promotion is continuous performance of the past exploits of the ancestors. Which in Ekine dramatic convention is performed by the ekine society as embedded in the drum lore tones of the chief drummer in the form of proverbs, metaphors and allegories, riddles, jokes, as African culture embraces a performative educational process. Thus representing these notes dramatically, endears the story through the language of performance and the role of the dramatic characters to the audience as they learn through observation and participation to pantomimically respond to the drum language signals of the chief drummer in respect to the story behind the play i.e. ferocious warrior, protector of the harem, jester, clown, pilferer etc. which are mostly anthropomorphic characters bearing human characteristics been presented by masked dramatic characters through use of gestures, and dance movements. In a sense, the orderliness experienced in African traditional theatrical performances process in terms of composition, movement, rhythm, picturization and pantomimic dramatization must be the handiwork of some great artist, which need to be preserved and transmitted (Ikiroma-Owiye, 2007). Especially as it relates to the performance proper when the traditional directors functions of the chief drummer comes to fore in the omniscient dictates in performance be it in dance, ritual festival or dramatic reenactment in traditional African societies. Thus this study explicates the chief drummer's functions as an encyclopedia of cultural performance in Ekine drama performance using language in cultural education and transmission.

Thus continuous performance and documentation preserves his contributions to dramatic communication in terms of tonal narrative will endear his functions in world dramatic art for posterity. In furtherance of this discourse on the functionality and preservation of traditional African performance dynamics we will also examine what some other scholars have said about African theatre in fulfilling the core of drama. Especially when it comes to the role of artists, like who is in charge of the performance process, the language of the performance, the script, director, directing, and the place of the audience in a performance.

Richard Schechner (1973, 9. 5-6), in his article "Drama, script, theatre and performance" explaining the role and functionality of performance in society opines that;

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In support of this view of the functionality of traditional African masked drama as fulfilling the core of drama in a modern sense of context and content, the erudite scholar Okafor (1999, p.40), opines that;

The core of drama has three basic elements: performers ... spectators, and place of representation ... all other elements ... costume, scenery, dialogue, mime, and special effects ... aid the performer's imitative action ... are extrinsic characteristics that determine the peculiarity of different dramatic traditions. The Japanese Noh performer uses mime, music, and stylized movements as techniques of representation. the performer of the Indian Kathakali drama uses esoteric gestures and surrealistic costumes and make-up to stimulate action that is being narrated in song, and Chinese shadow players imitate action by the use of "moving figures made of animal skins and cardboard ... different traditions obviously utilize different techniques to imitate action. It would therefore be misleading to review African mask-performance in terms of the dramatic techniques of another culture.

Thus in a sense this study clearly shows that Tombiana Egbelegbe masquerade performance is a kind of drama that has fulfilled the basic concept and context of drama, in preserving, promoting and educating the people on their cultural performance processes.. As there is a space for performance, actors and an audience and a language of performance which embodies the script, storyline and language of performance. Subsequently as long as African traditional drama meets the criteria of what constitutes drama; actors, place, audience, director, directing and a language of performance, then it serves its primary purpose of entertaining, educating and enlightening its audience on the peoples culture and traditions.

2. Conclusion

Drama has been the major means of cultural transmission in all societies though forms and methods differ, it has fulfilled its desired purpose. This we have seen in Ekine drama (Tombiana Egbelegbe festival) of the Tombia people in Degema Local Government Area of Rivers State in Nigeria, that Egbelegbe masquerade festival serves as the major means of education and cultural transmission from generation to generation for the Tombia people. From the findings Egbelegbe festival performance was carried out in three days. Each day's performance entails one evolution of the sun. Every masquerade performs sequentially on each day of the

performance. The performance for the first and second day are not appreciated monetarily and materially but on the third days performance an interlude was created where the masquerades came out to the arena all and sit in order of hierarchy and are appreciated by the community one after the other in an orderly sequence.

The study has also through careful examination shown the directorial prowess of the Chief drummer, as the encyclopedia of performance and cultural language transmission when he dictates, controls and coordinates the overall dramatic process of composition, movement, rhythm, picturization, pantomimic dramatization including audience performer relations. His renditions also embody the script of the performance because this performance culture presents spirit characters who do not speak like mortal men. The drummer communicates what to do, how to do and when to do it to the dramatic characters. In performance the drum language speaks a varied version of the original language of the Tombia (Iyankpo) people. Thus if a chief drummer dies an encyclopedia of knowledge is lost to posterity so in order not to lose most notes and details of the drum language in cultural preservation and transmission there is need to interpret his role in an Ekine masquerade drama. The study has used assumptions and theories of performance scholars coupled with assertions of scholars of African theatre to logically present the theatricality and dramatic presentational practices in African societies by some scholars like Finnegan (1970), Schechner (1985), Okafor (1991), Scott (1993) hinged on Schechner's performance theory (1977). Who believe that the art of theatre is a universal experience relative to the performing society that has similar characteristics all over the world? And Africa has the best theatrical performance manifestations especially within her indigenous traditional festivals, which we have dramatically examined, defined and analyzed creatively exposing the chief drummer's role in the use of the drum language of communication to make a clear sense of vision to decipher the innate meanings of his omniscient directorial role in educating and preserving cultural practices through the performance process.

Conclusively from this study we can decipher that it is relatively clear that post-colonial studies has been an attempt to intervene in the objective reconstruction of cultural knowledge relating to performance culture of African societies rewriting and documenting such performances from its cultural perspective in terms of documenting them theoretically and audio-visually to classify them in its proper dramatic content and context. This study embraces different ways of knowing as it has cut to the root of how knowledge as organized in and deciphered in masquerade drama by the omniscient timeless fingers of the chief drummer in deciphering language in African drama. In support of the unwritten text Northrop Frye in *The Critical Path* observes that in oral cultures verbal continuity is preserved mainly ... linear form of remembering and passing on. Writing breaks into this temporal movement by providing a visual and special focus for continuity. In that visual focus there is the source of a greater stability, so that the anxiety of continuity is no longer dependent wholly on meaning. According to Socrates in the *Phaedrus* the Egyptian god Thot, having invented writing, boasted that his invention would immensely improve the memory, but was told by the other gods, that on the contrary it would destroy memory (45).

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