

THEATRICAL AESTHETICS AND FUNCTIONAL VALUES OF EKUECHI MASQUERADE ENSEMBLE OF THE EBIRA PEOPLE IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT Over the years Ekuechi festival of the Ebira people of Nigeria has drawn undue attention because of the energetic physical nuances that characterise its celebration. Little or no attention has been given to the festival as an art with functional responsibilities to the society. This essay explores the festival to investigate the dynamics of artistic theatre elements in a pure festive performance setting, and the functional relevance of the festival to the Ebira in particular and the wider society in general.

Performative realities of space, spectacles, costumes, make-up, lighting, music, dance, props and the mise-en-scene, predominantly shape our aesthetic priorities in this essay. The ethnographic documentation of this festival has become very important because of its socio-aesthetic relevance in the understanding of the cosmology and artistic heritage of the Ebira people. The essay concludes that if the organisers take full advantage of modern theatre practice, the entire festival has potentials of becoming a major tourist attraction with meaningful economic and material benefits for the Ebira people.

Key Words: Festival; Performance; Masquerade; Ebira People; Song.

INTRODUCTION

Analysing Festivals within the context of theatre practice is not entirely a new scholarly enterprise. Dionysian Festival of the ancient Greeks, for instance, formed the nucleus of a vibrant theatre culture in Greece, which now serves as a reference point for world theatre culture and the emerging new radical theatre forms. There have been raging arguments on whether African festivals qualify as drama or theatre. Eloquent voices that contributed to these arguments include Mahood (1966), Kirby (1974), Ogunba (1978), Adedeji (1978), Clark (1981) and Rotimi (1981). Others are Echeruo (1981), Horn (1981), Amankulor (1981) and Ibitokun (1993). It is not the intention of this essay to further excavate, rehash and reposition these claims and counter claims. What is important to us here however is Ogunba (1978)'s position, which Ibitokun (1993: 131) also identified with, that there are no universals of what constitute drama and theatre. He argued that:

We should for the moment cast aside the theory of drama developed in the Western tradition and see the African festival for what it is. We may then find that in its conception, articulation and artistic development the African Festival performs the same function and evokes a similar response to what literate drama does in the

Western tradition (p. 25).

The import of this position for us is that what constitutes drama or theatre is culture referent. In other words it will be misleading to maintain that theatrical experience that does not conform to Western theatre cannon is no theatre. A theatrical analysis of a festival within an African culture therefore has the capacity to share similarities with Western theatre tradition and also present its own unique aesthetic features.

This paper focuses mainly on the activities that affect the artistic outing of *Ekuechi* (the nocturnal raconteur masquerader); who is a composite actor who sings, chants, dances and directs the drumming ensemble and the audience on the general performative outlook of the Ekuechi festival. The aesthetic analysis in this case is informed by folk imagination, which is the imaginative collaboration of the virile artistic resources, anchored by the raconteur masquerade, to produce the Ekuechi performance. This research relies mainly on primary and secondary sources of information. The primary sources are derived from my consistent participation in the festival within the last thirty years, and oral interviews with key traditional functionaries in the Ebira tradition in order to properly position the Ebira perspective of theatrical action in the festival. Secondary sources of information include the literature of relevant journal articles, textbooks, monographs, microfilms, and thesis.

Ekuechi festival is a ritualistic enactment of myth, legend and traditional social events meant to mark the end of the year and usher in a new one. The Ebira people of Kogi State in Nigeria celebrate it annually. It begins from late November, runs through December and ends in early January. The long duration is due to the fact that its period of celebration differs from one community to another in Ebiraland. Essentially, the practice is the same. The priest of *Ireba Eku* (masquerade cult) shrine sets the actual day of the festival after consulting with *eva* (divine oracle) for a special sign that guides the timing of the festival. Towards the end of every year, the priest of *Ireba* shrine always finds a dead mouse (*Itapesu*) at the entrance of the shrine. This vividly indicates that the current year is dead in order to give way to a new one. The day this sign is confirmed puts the date of the festival at twenty-eight days thenceforth. The star event of this festival is a night affair from which women are generally excluded. Only witches and *Onokus*⁽¹⁾ may participate. The presence of the witches is normally invisible to all present except men that also have special powers to discern spiritual presence.

Linguistically, Ebira-Igu or Koto, Ebira-Etuno, Ebira-Panda, Ebira-Oje, Ebira-Tao, and Ebira-Agatu belong to the same language group with dialectal variations. What binds them together perhaps is their claim to a common cultural ancestry. My focus is basically on the Ebira-Taos whose territory lies southwest of the confluence of the rivers Niger and Benue (Adiva, 1989: 1). The Ebira-Taos dwell in a rugged, hilly area and are traditionally farmers. They are also well acknowledged for their artistry in handwoven cloth. The land they occupy is very small, when compared to the teeming population of the people. This small territory also has rocky topography, which makes settlement difficult. Paradoxically, it is in these rocks that a number of mineral resources are deposited. It is here for instance, that Nigeria's steel industry is sited because of the large deposit of iron found in the land. Water is a scarce com-

modity and little space for expansion is a disturbing reality, which the people have to contend with. Despite these natural constraints to living, the people are optimistic and resilient. It is with this frame of mind, that majority of Ebira people eagerly look forward to Ekuechi festival every year to reunite with their ancestral descent.

As a popular festival, Ekuechi is full of pomp and pageantry, with a dynamic integration of poetry, chants, mimicry, mime, dance, song, music, drumming, mask, make-up, costume and significant cultural symbols. All these cohere vibrantly to attest to Ehusani (1991: 181)'s claim that "it is in *Ekuechi* that the vitality and vivacity, and also the artistic genius of Ebiras find the highest expression." *Ekuechi* is ancestral masquerade. *Ekuechi*, which represents the ancestors, is believed to 'descend' (*Chi*) from the world beyond during Ekuechi festival. *Ekuechi* and *Chi* thus respectively form the prefix and suffix in *Ekuechi e Chi*. Literally translated, it means, "the ancestors are descending." This partly explains how the name of the festival is derived.

ORIGIN OF THE FESTIVAL

There are few accounts of how the festival started. However, the differences in these accounts are not fundamental. Generally, *Ireba Ekuechi* (masquerade cult) was believed to have been formed under the divine instruction of God to check the excesses of women, apart from serving as ancestor worship. Myth has it that after creating man and woman as husband and wife, one day God sent for the man but he was too busy to honour the call. Instead, he requested his wife to heed God's call on his behalf. God gave her *Irakwo* (an egg-like object that contains the secrets of life and has the capacity to manifest supernatural powers) for her husband. Having discovered its contents and being fascinated by them, she hid it in her uterus and later swallowed it without giving it to her husband. She thereafter became quite powerful, performing supernatural feats as turning into any animal and changing back to a human being. She could instantly grow wings to fly around in astral travels. She also became capable of all sorts of mysterious transformations. Her husband became envious of her powers. In sympathy, God enabled the husband to create the Ekuechi masquerade cult from which women membership is strongly discouraged as a counterforce to the powers the women possess. The Adeika of Eika, the traditional Chief of Eika clan in Ebiraland in an interview recorded by Shamoos Adeiza, collaborated this notion:

Eika is the senior clan in Ebiraland and Ekuechi originated from them. The real origin of the festival is a traditional secret and I wonder whether I should reveal it. Well, well, I will...Ekuechi originated from necessity, for when witchcraft crept into Ebiraland it was the women who reigned supreme in the cruel craft and they cheated us men by it. Many people were being killed by them especially men. In retaliation, we men also set up the Ekuechi cult to dread the women. Women are made to believe that *Ekuechis* who perform during Ekuechi are ancestor spirits raised from the dead to come and admonish, warn and punish evildoers in their songs and ritual (Adeiza, 1994).

This is one of the major reasons women's participation in the night performance of *Ekuechi* is highly restricted. According to Ogunba (1978: 24),

in many African cultures women are not admitted into the secrets of the masking art; indeed, they are often the favourite target of masking and satirical ridicule, the assumption being that they live a more poetical life than their menfolk, have secret powers, are more of spirits than human beings, and therefore an object of fear or veneration.

A more encompassing conceptual thought on this phenomenon of female exclusion from masquerade cults within the African context resides in the understanding that:

Traditionally, like everything else of any importance, masquerading and its secrets are the prerogatives of the men-and initiates at that. Women have been excluded from sharing in the secrets for they are weak and fickle and are therefore not fit to take part in them. They are also mysterious and sometimes unclean. They cannot therefore approach these ancestral manifestations, whose character is diametrically opposed to their own. Any meeting between them would have adverse effects on both parties. Much harm would come to the women and masquerades would lose something of their virtue. Apart from this fear, there is the desire to avert the wrath of these spirits whose condescension to visit mankind in the form of masquerades is a great honour, which must not be abused. They are mindful of the fact that ancestral spirits are superior to mere mortals and constitute an unusual phenomenon when they assume physical forms (Nzekwu, 1981: 132).

In modern times, however, women are beginning to pick information here and there on the secrets of masquerading without being participants. Nevertheless, the mysticism surrounding the masquerade cult is still intact, for previous attempt to neutralise this always met with stiff mystic and physical opposition from custodians and a cross section of Ebira people who believe strongly in the inviolability of such cultural practices.

According to oral account and Sani (1993: 84-85), Obaji and Ododo were said to be the progenitors of *Ekú*. These were two brothers who constantly antagonised each other on account of seniority contestation. But seniority was generally conceded to Obaji, and Ododo was not pleased. One day Obaji took ill and was about to die. His brother, Ododo, said he would not like Obaji to be his senior here on earth and again be his senior in the great beyond (*Idaneku*). Ododo then decided to change his identity with his dying brother. When Obaji died, Ododo put on the costumes of an *Ekú* and the women were made to believe that Ododo rose from the dead. So, Obaji became the senior of the living, while Ododo became the senior of the dead in the world beyond. *Adega*, a masquerade character who specialised in the chants of historical events, myths and legends, gave a similar account in his 1983 annual Echane festival performance:

Ozi Ododo vana si ozi Obaji dosi mo nyi ehi ni
 Ijo ozi Obaji vaso ka yo ozi Ododo
 Ka ani ewun ma ze ada anini
 Do ozi Ododo va se so ka ine hi ni

Do Ododo ka Obaji ana vo zoku yoni ehononi
 Dore vana ve ozoku idaneku yo ni
 Di Ododo wusu ni
 Da hure Eku ni
 Ihe gwo eta ani do Obaji oni re wu suni (Adega, 1983).

(Translation)

Ododo's son took Obaji's daughter for a concubine
 When Obaji's daughter told Ododo's son of her father's illness,
 Ododo's son went home to relay the information
 Ododo enviously opined that Obaji who is his senior in the human world
 Will again be his senior in the world beyond (*Idaneku*).
 Therefore, Ododo passed on before Obaji.
 His Children made *Ekuechi* out of him.
 The third day, Obaji also passed on....

The two accounts by Sani and Adega slightly contrast each other but both agree that *Ekuechi* cult came to be after Ododo's death or exchange of identity.

There are five prominent masquerades in the cult. These are *Ekuechi'rahu*, *Ekuechi'ahete*, *Ekuechi'okise*, *Ekuechi'echichi* and *Ekuechi'oba*. *Ekuechi'rahu* features during the night performance of *Ekuechi*, *Ebe*, *Okehi* and *Otu* festivals. It is also performed at the funeral ceremonies of a deceased male elder to transport him to the transitional void, and to embody the spirit of the dead for a gentle repose of his soul in the world beyond before transmigrating into an ancestral figure. This performance also takes place at night. *Ekuechi'ahete* ensures a safe and free passage in the ancestral visits to earth during *Ekuechi* festival. *Ekuechi'okise* proclaims divine messages from God and prophecies to people with clairvoyance, featuring in both *Ekuechi* and *Echane* festivals. *Ekuechi'echichi* is performed fully masked during *Echane* festival, which is mainly a broad daylight affair with active women involvement in the general celebrative format but not in the core performance rituals. *Ekuechi'echichi* also performs in *Ekuechi* festival, as *Agadagidi* with no prescribed roles except to add colour to the general festive mood. The performers are now referred to as *Agadagidis* because they do not don their full costumes and often do not mask. They chase people around and playfully flog them. Sometimes, some men offer themselves to be flogged to test and exhibit their manly valour. *Ekuechi'oba* does not feature in *Ekuechi* or any festival. It announce the masking season is also performed in some core traditional funeral rites and to commemorate deceased male elders of high traditional standing as the *Ohinoyi* (the traditional political head of Ebira people), *Ohindasi* and *Ozumi*, who are key figures in Ebira Traditional Council. To have an *Ekuechi'oba* perform is considered an extreme honour because it is believed that its appearance will atone for all the sins committed by the deceased while alive. Thus heavenly bliss is assured in the world beyond. *Ekuechi'oba* can come out during the day or at night but always fully masked, irrespective of the time of appearance. To acknowledge this unique and valued appearance, the families of the deceased often sacrifice rams or cows, depending on their financial capabilities, to mark out a bloodline for *Ekuechi'oba* to cross into their compound. The traditional importance of this masquerade is further established by the fact that it must rain within that same day or the next of its appearance. Its

coming out is also believed to secure peace for the land. It is the wish of an average traditional Ebiraman to live long enough to merit the appearance of an *Ekuechi* at his funeral. That majority of these prominent masquerades of the Eku cult feature in Ekuechi ensemble makes the festival a converging forum for Ebira ancestors, and further enunciates its unifying force for the corporate existence of Ebira people.

Ekuechi festival enjoys corporate ethnic involvement in terms of preparation and presentation. At its artistic peak, the festival can easily be mistaken for a celebrative spectacle meant to entertain only. But it always has conceptual bases that transcend mere entertainment objective (Nzewi, 1997: 20). Put differently, there are some functional values of the festival that are conceived and manifested within the general festival atmosphere. For instance however entertaining, satirical songs are rendered for social control. Very often, an important personality of the community who is satirised might be carried away by the entertainment values of the songs without instantly apprehending their import. He then sneaks away from the festive arena in shame at the point of cognition.

Our major thrust in this essay therefore is to look at the theatrical aesthetic features in Ekuechi festival with the aim of investigating the dynamics of their artistic qualities as theatre elements in a pure festival performative setting, and the functional values of the festival. The ethnographic documentation of this festival has become very important because of its socio-aesthetic relevance in the understanding of the cosmology of the Ebira people and their artistic heritage.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The worldview of the Ebira people is positively inclined. It sees life as essentially well and good. The order of the universe is seen as benevolent and predictable. There is justice and constancy in its rules and regulations. This is why an average Ebira person would not hesitate to vehemently question any form of injustice with every resource at his disposal. This could be between him and his people or foreigners. The quest for justice, if resisted, can sometimes degenerate to a very distasteful physical approach, which many have misinterpreted as ‘vicious, wicked, and hostile’ attributes of the Ebira. This philosophy of life is further interwoven with their belief in the world of the unborn, the living and the dead, which is similar to Soyinka’s “dome of continuity.” The belief finds more visible expression in Ekuechi festival, which celebrates ancestral transmigration. In other words, the festival is ancestor worship. The dead elderly ones are believed to have only moved from the land of the living to a higher realm, from where they constantly watch over their people in the world of the living. They take note of their wrong doings, travails and rate of progress. All these they address with positive intent when they transmigrate to the land of the living through the Eku-masquerades that feature in Ekuechi festival. There are several of them. They move individually from homestead to homestead, felicitating with the people. They admonish them for the wrong doings of the past and warn against future wrongs, pray for a blissful New Year, prophesise good tidings, and harvest all manners of requests from the people with a promise to see them fulfilled. These requests are usually centred on the desire to have children,

build houses, and generally to live a fulfilling life. In many cases, people find their requests answered before the next Ekuechi festival. This explains why every homestead goes into elaborate preparation (clean their environment, buy new dresses, cook special delicacies such as pounded yam, bean bread, and viand, and provide drinks such as palm-wine and beer) to welcome home their ancestors during the festival. Further requests are made for fortification against the coming festival.

Structurally, Ekuechi proper is preceded by an eve (*Unehe*) event. This is a musical and dance concert (*Ikede*) that involves both men and women. Its entertaining format provides avenue for social interaction between both sexes to form and new ties of friendship among indigenes and visitors. It is a highly specialised performance with much artistic merit worthy of scholarly attention. The import of this eve is not only to signify the beginning of the Ekuechi festival but also to give the people a psychological boost for the highly ritualistic event that provides them with the opportunity of communing with their ancestors. This is further strengthened by consultation with *Ovavo* (diviners) who look into the future of the festival and the people. After the celebration sacrificial prescriptions could be made to avert any looming danger, placate the gods and ancestors, and purify the land and the people.

In the evening of the Ekuechi day proper, slit wooden musical instruments (*Agidibo*) are beaten at strategic points within the community so that everyone can hear (Fig. 1). This is a warning sign for the women folk and little children to retreat indoors. Flurries of movements are noticed as women who have been cooking for their husbands to host the ancestors hurry up to terminate their domestic activities and retire indoors. This is followed by a calm but tense atmosphere because of the expectation of *Ekue'ahete* (path clearing masquerade character) whose source of emergence is concealed and widely unknown. Its mysterious appearance, coupled with its weird outlook made more fearful by the horrible noise it produces and the sharp glittering cutlass it carries to hack down any obstacle on his way, account for the fear and awe which grip the whole community. Clad in several strings of small metal gongs (*Ireha*) and palm fronds, very disturbing sound is produced as *Ekue'ahete* strikes a big metal gong (*uwse*) as he runs all over the community without looking behind him. This is a symbolic path clearing for the ancestors that are being expected. No mortal dares to stand on *Ekue'ahete's* route or else it can behead such a person and anoint his head with the victim's blood. However, there is no record of such encounter in modern times.



Fig. 1. *Agidibo*.

When *Ekū'ahete* has finished its rounds, *Akatapa* masquerade characters take over. They are the embodiment of the spirits of dead women who on this night unite as co-wives exchanging banter and throwing tantrums. This demonstrates the age-long rivalry and 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 perceive in each house. In the process, they satirize people in the immediate 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. *Akatapas* cunningly emerge and chant songs foretelling the arrival of the ancestors. They speak in harsh and grating voices through the use of a cylindrical pipe or reed of about four or five inches long and about a half to one inch diameter. This is tautly covered on one end with a bat's wing or spider's cocoon held in place with a thread. It is also significant to note that their appearance signifies for the men folk indoors that *Ekū'ahete* has concluded his rounds. Thus, the coast is clear for them to come out of their houses to prepare for the star event of this festival –the performance of *Ekū'rahu*.

There are several of the *Ekū'rahu* that exhibit their artistry during this festival. Each has a well-organised group of supporters, which are there to bolster the competitive standing of their masquerade. The gamut of organisational requirements is very complex with dense spiritual firework and extemporaneous ritual demands as occasion may require. The import however is to intone the competitive sense inherent in this performance. This also establishes the main reason behind the intense preparation usually witnessed among participant-audience to the masquerade during Ekuechi festival.

Apart from classified groups of supporters, there are other spectators who come from far and near to witness and seek entertainment from the festival. To be entertained thoroughly means getting actively involved in a way because the entertainment values of the performance are best felt in effective audience participation. Thus, most members of the audience are easily integrated into the performance proper because of the dynamic nature of the performance, which has communal disposition that always leaves a vacuum to be creatively filled by any partaker in the artistic experience. This is also true of most Nigerian communal celebrations as expressed by Gumucio-Dagron (1994: 59).

For every *Ekū* raconteur, the following levels of organised supporters are mandatorily present:

- (a) anchormen
- (b) security men
- (c) club members
- (d) active and passive spectators

(a) *Anchormen*: These are men with a lot of spiritual strength acquired through sorcery and herbal art. They serve as the henchmen of *Ekū'rahu*. They are usually six in number. They give protective cover to the *Ekū'rahu* against any spiritual attack from another *Ekū'rahu*, witches and other demonic forces that are believed to hover around the scene of performance in this night of ancestor worship. This is why both the anchormen and the custodians of *Ekū'rahu* usually engage in a lot of divination, sacrifices and rituals virtually on a daily basis throughout the year before

the main singing performance. They stay closest to the singing masquerade on stage. Because of their believed capabilities of clairvoyance, they are seen as the physical supreme essence representing all other unseen supportive spiritual forces the masquerade may possess. All the other members of the supporting troupe, from the security men to spectators, take instructions from them either directly or through their acolytes and votives.

(b) *Security Men*: These are able-bodied men, often retired soldiers, hunters or men otherwise tested in warfare. They are also said to have metaphysical powers, which confer supernatural vision on them. In action, their presence can send fright down the spine of non-initiates. Their main duty is to maintain law and order, protect and defend all participants and spectators, attack and eject from the scene of performance any foreign or obstructing elements. It is forbidden to incur the wrath of these men. Traditionally, these roles were reserved for a masquerade type known as *Akisobe* (hench security officer. Fig. 2); a very stout and strong-looking personage. There were usually one or two found in every *Ekurahu* group. They lead intermittent procession to intimidate any approaching potential troublemaker. Two *Akisobes* have since proved inadequate to handle the emerging yearly complex security responsibilities. Hence the present form of security system. The *Akisobes* still join forces with the security men to maintain law and order apart from their frequent display of manly valour in movements and dance.

(c) *Club Members*: The club system was primarily instituted to bring together all key participants (very small size) responsible for the organisation of the *Ekurahu* performances. It started as an informal gathering committed to ensuring a successful outing for the *Ekurahu*. Mainly comprising non-literate cultural vanguards, the club provided a forum for sorting out traditional and sacrificial rites that were intended to uplift the performance of the raconteur masquerade and to do so in safety because of the dense spiritual network that surrounds the masquerade performance. The anchor-men constituted the inner caucus of this club. With the infiltration of literate cultural vanguards into this caucus, about thirty years ago, the scope of membership and activities became enlarged to include different age grades and socio-aesthetic functions respectively. These literate ones now dominate the organisational hierarchy of the club. The anchor-men are now mostly ex-officio members with less visibility but actively involved on traditional matters.

In its present make-up, the club members constitute the intellectual coterie for the masquerade on all issues of planning and logistics. It could be regarded as a social arm of this cultural experience. It is here that almost all ideas bordering on creativity and modern innovations are generated. The import once again is to outshine other rival groups. This is why their discussions and major decisions are always held in conclaves before public performances are held. The affairs of these clubs are usually just like any other mundane club. There are offices ranging from chairman to treasurer and standing orders to guide their proceedings at meetings. Sometimes, it is not uncommon to find some of them duly registered with the State Ministry of Youths, Sports and Culture or other relevant government departments with operational constitutions. Most of the members are youths of the land who are also usually from the lineage clan of the custodian of the raconteur masquerade. There are those who do not belong to the lineage clan who are committed members.

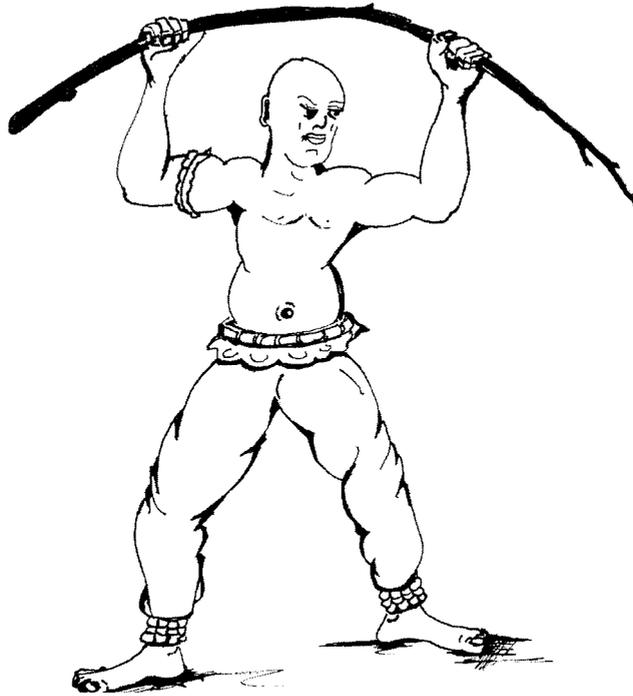


Fig.2. *Akisobe*: Hench Security Officer.

The club names are always coined after the name of the raconteur masquerades, e.g. *Achewuru* Boys Association (ABA), *Avokuta* Club Members, and *Irenuohi* Youths. It is note-worthy that it is from these club members that security men are mostly recruited. All other engagements necessary for the effective performance of the *Ekurahu* are assigned to other club members. They serve mainly as chorus groups strategically positioned within the performance venue to help echo all songs. They are organised according to their age grades.

(d) *Active and Passive Spectators*: Spectating during this performance is a matter of choice. Active and passive involvement usually overlaps without clear distinction. The active engagement of spectators in the performance is usually impulsive and spontaneous as guided by the mood of the festivity and the invigorating nature of the performance itself. What one finds is constant action and constant relaxation. As some spectators cease to perform actions ranging from frenzied dancing to vivacious display of excitement, others pick up.

THEATRICAL AESTHETIC FEATURES

I. Preparation and Performance

As in modern conception of theatre practice, there is a period of intensive rehearsals, designing for the performance and assembling or building of all necessary props, costumes and other paraphernalia. This intensity is further reinforced by the competitive notion of the night masquerade performance. There is so much at stake for every *Ekurahu* group who must ensure an outstanding outing as the cultural ambassador of his lineage and clan. The failure of an *Ekurahu* is often equated to the failure of his clan generally and his success engenders honour, respect and high social rating for his clan. Prominent personalities in each clan therefore readily commit time, material and financial resources to avert corporate failure. Each group can also go any length to ensure victory. They spy on each other's artistic and organisational strategies, try through diabolical means to render each other redundant and invalid during the performance while also fortifying themselves against such diabolic effects. The weaker ones will always succumb. The support of other neighbouring communities is also sought to further bolster their competitive stands. Herein lies the politics of the performance.

Three stages of rehearsal can easily be identified. The first stage starts about six months to the festival period with the custodian of the singing masquerade and the anchormen only rehearsing on a regular basis for about three months. This restriction is placed to enable the anchormen give their blessings to all the songs before they become commodities for a wider audience. The aim is to avoid satiric songs that could generate crises within the clan and the community at large. This means that the anchormen have the power to censor any song that is considered offensive in whatever manner. This evaluative role is very important, because over the years offended personalities ridiculed by the songs have organised public mobs to attack any household where the audio tapes of these songs were played. Sometimes houses were razed by fire. Then counterattacks ensued. Ambushes were laid, and lives and

property were lost. Such antagonism could be carried over to the next festival if community and clan leaders did not wade in timely to resolve the differences. It is therefore, not uncommon to find several cases of litigation in courts of law within the community after the festival. These also account for the reasons why government has on few occasions moved in promptly to ban the festival.⁽²⁾ It is for these reasons every *Ekur'rahu* group put in place an internal self-checking mechanism spearheaded by the anchormen. This has helped in drastically reducing the rendition of caustic invectives, and the sometimes overtly overzealousness of the competing groups.

The anchormen also suggest to the custodian, who like most others is illiterate, topical issues around which songs could be composed. They also select and arrange sonorous and energising songs for the intermission procession and the grand finale of the masquerade performance. As soon as the anchormen are satisfied with what the singing masquerader has to offer, the next phase of rehearsals begins.

This second stage is when the custodian assembles all the club members to teach them his songs. This is also done for about three months before the performance. But the regularity and intensity of rehearsals increase when it is about six weeks to performance day. It is very important that all the club members are song-perfect before the performance because the participant-audience depends on them to learn the songs during the performance. This explains why they are usually placed strategically in groups around the performance venue in the midst of the participant-audience. Nevertheless, it is always very amazing how the participant-audience learn the songs only after about two or three repetitions. It is important to note that these songs are not communally derived, as in most other African festivals, but are original compositions. This is one dynamic element of the performance.

Premium is usually placed on this phase of rehearsal because how well songs are rendered, echoed and chorused are some of the major indices upon which the level of performance of the masquerades are intuitively rated within the community. Apart from the songs, no other aspects of the performance are rehearsed, not even dance and drumming. Given the dexterity, with which dances, music and other displays are done with artistic symmetry during this performance, it is difficult to acknowledge them as unrehearsed pieces. This is very impressive, providing yet another dynamic element in the performance.

The third stage approximates the final dress and technical rehearsal and on the eve of the performance, just as in any orthodox performance conceptions. All issues relating to the performance are sorted out. For the first time, drums are introduced and people are allowed to dance. In a sense, it is not a rehearsal but rather a complement that heralds to the community the level of preparedness of the raconteur masquerade. It is also a promotion aimed at attracting more spectators than the other rival masquerades for the event proper.

All rehearsals take place in a strictly secluded venue. The first stage, because of the limited number of people involved, takes place in an inner chamber of a household. The second and third stages are conducted in the grooves and hillsides located at the outskirts of the community. It is from here that a procession of singing, dancing and drumming heads back to town providing a foretaste of the main event. The artistic performance is also in three phases too with an intermission of procession in

between each phase to pay homage to elders and key figures in the society. Gifts ranging from money to material items (clothing, foodstuff and furniture) are mostly given during this period. On the performance day, the first phase starts from *Inori* (shrine of the spirit cult) “which is credited with special powers to protect the lives of those devoted to it” (Ehusani, 1991: 183). *Ori* (spirit cult) is also a channel of reaching out to *Ohomorihi* (Supreme God).⁽³⁾ *Ekur’rahus’* main purposes of coming here are to pray, conjure and beg for assistance from their guiding spirits, henchmen and women. The procession to *Inori* from the “emerging grove” of the masquerade could last for thirty minutes, depending on the distance in between the two and the agility of the custodian. Usually, because of the multitude of people around, the procession is prolonged. However, the anchormen and the security men create moving space for the raconteur masquerade and prevent people from crowding around it.

On arrival at *Inori*, absolute silence is secured with the striking of big metal gongs (*uwse*). They are believed to parade metaphysical powers, which compel utter silence when struck. With this silence, certain propitiation rites are performed which mainly involve the breaking of kola nuts and pouring of libation of palm oil mixed with salt on a designated spot. This is followed by a long rendition of praise chants. These chants are used to eulogise God, mother earth, gods, elders, women, men, young and old, Ododo and Obaji (the forerunners of the *Ekur’rahus* cult). The whole chant is rendered in a spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion. This goes on until the creative feat gathers more momentum and crescendos into a stylised dance to which others join to mark the end of the praise chant. More songs are rendered for about one to two hours before the performance in *Inori* ends. From here begins an intermission procession that takes *Ekur’rahus* round the community to greet and sing their fresh melodies to their supporters, before they retire to their respective platforms to commence the next phase of performance.

The second phase takes place on a booth stage made of wide platform (*Uta*) that is built high enough for all to see the singing masquerade characters in action. This is where he has an all-night long performance with his supporters and spectators. He displays his virtuosity in singing and artistry in dancing. These are moments of artistic-splendour when the muses of creativity are believed to be in total control. At such moments, the masquerade is seen to ingeniously combine several intricate dance steps in a most arresting manner that prompts the participant-audience to spontaneously join the performance. Generally, *Ekur’rahus* render songs in praise of *Ohomorihi ovaraka iduma, ogodogodo onuwoza ometu* (God Almighty, the most high), as well as worthy personalities to the individual musicians, especially those who have given them one level of assistance or the other. They also curse and vilify those they consider morally bereft, evil and detrimental to the progress of the society.

The final phase, which is the grand finale, takes place during the early hours of the morning in the market square, which is wide enough to accommodate all the singing masquerades participating in the festival and their numerous supporters. Every masquerade has a designated spot for his group where a platform is also erected for him. This is the climax of the performance where the performances of all the masquerades are assessed and judged. Even though there are no appointed team of assessors, it is very easy for all present to reach a consensus on who the winner is,

judging from what they see and hear around them in terms of artistry and aesthetics of performance. The matter is sometimes made easier where two masquerade artists that are overbearing and dexterous in songs and staging aesthetics are involved. For instance, until the demise of their custodians, *Achewuru Anavehi Idoji* and *Okevere Iduka* were topmost archrivals artists of Ekuechi festival to the extent that other participating masquerade characters were marginalized. Every year, the acclaimed winner was always one of these two. The major reason for this can be traced to the overwhelming support they both enjoyed from the majority of Ebira indigenes because of their artistic resourcefulness. Besides, they both came from two well-known clans in Ebiraland, Okovi and Agada. Through their illustrious activities, they projected the clans on the forefront of Ebira socio-political setting. For this reason, other minor clans come up behind these big two to enjoy political favours especially during local government elections.

Ordinarily, the two topmost competitors are friends. Friendship ties are temporarily forgotten during the night performance but resumed thereafter. Achewuru was well acknowledged for the highly poetic, philosophical and prophetic depth of his songs. They were so profound that his songs acquired enduring relevance. Okevere, had effective command of stage artistry in dance and other stage business. He was a delight to watch, even for a stranger who did not understand the Ebira language. People seemed to have preference for the free-flowing and meaningful songs, for it is in them that social issues are carefully delineated with useful lessons to learn. Whoever won the show of any particular year depended largely on the ingenuity of his supporters to do so. In fact, they invented the modern notion of club system in Ekuechi festival. Perhaps the greatest legacy they bequeathed to the other emerging masquerades was their highly skillful organisational structure for managing the star event of Ekuechi festival. When the custodian of Okevere (Isa Danga) died in 1980, the festival lost its lustre, as there was no effective or matchig competitor with Achewuru. And when the custodian of Achewuru (Ajagu Obeito) eventually died in 1989, the festival lost its major attraction. Nevertheless, Achewuru is generally and popularly acknowledged as the greatest. Twelve years after the demise of the custodian, his songs remain evergreen. Most Ebira people, even those sojourning in foreign lands daily play the recorded audiotapes of his stage performances.

Artistically, the grand finale is the most interesting of all the phases. Those who could not make it to the night event troop out to the market square in the morning. The atmosphere is usually charged with artistic rivalry, as the processions mime from one end of the square to another. This is why it is not an event for teenagers and weaklings. Only highly provocative and energising songs are arranged and rendered at this moment. All the groups attempt to out-sing one another from audible reach because this is the decisive moment. When eventually a winner is generally acclaimed, the opponents' pride stands deflated. For the acclaimed winner, to be over-joyous can expectedly attract distasteful reaction from the opponents as could be found in local and international football competitions. At the end of the festival, many expectedly lose their voice for many days. What agitates one's mind though, is the obvious attempt by every group to out-do the other artistically for no prescribed prize. This outlines the significance and premium, which the Ebira people place on pride, honour and personal integrity.

II. Stage Decorations and Props

The setting is an open-air arrangement that can accommodate as many as four thousand people. The stage can be described as a booth stage. It is a wide platform of about 12-18 ft long, 7-11 ft wide 4ft high. There are four vertical poles at the four edges of the platform, which firmly hold the construction in place. They are about 12ft tall from the ground level to their aerial termination points. Some other poles are horizontally attached for support. This could be in one or two layers. When two layers are used, they are kept wide apart from each other to ensure adequate visibility (Fig. 3). A step unit is also attached to the platform through which the masquerade, the anchormen and a few trusted and reliable supporters can climb on the stage. Many times these people constitute visibility problem to the audience in their attempt to complementarily accompany the masquerade performer in music and dance. This is a situation the audience does not hesitate to protest against. This needs to be addressed. Building the stage into two or three levels can easily solve this problem. Usually, planks are used for the construction of the stage. Perhaps

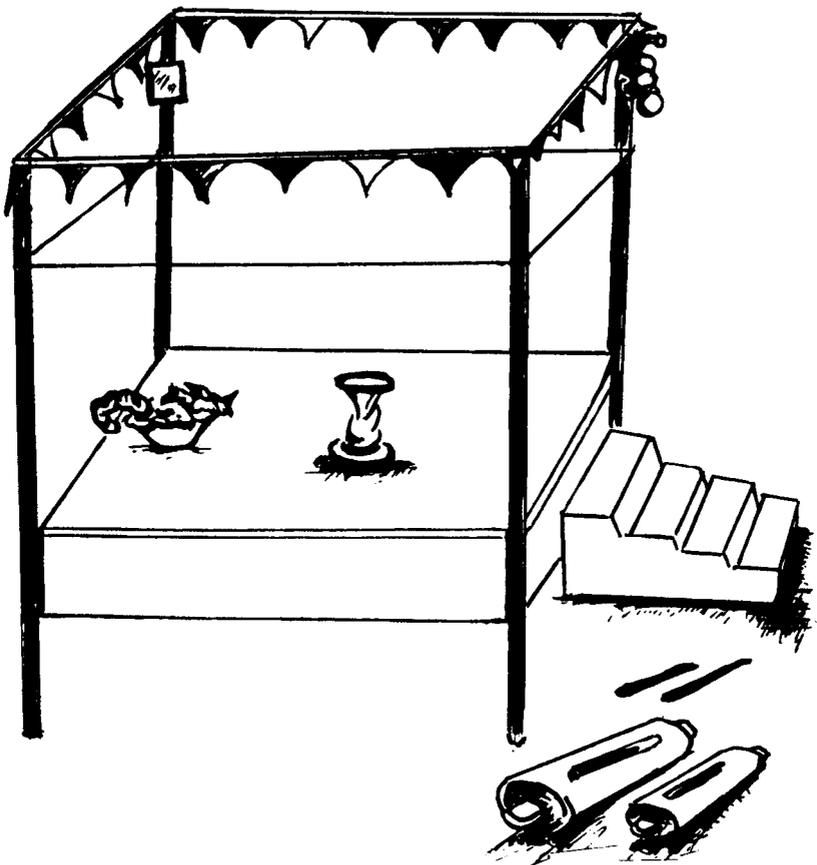


Fig.3. *Agidibo* on the floor: Booth Stage with Decorations and Props.

because there have been one or two cases of the platform collapsing in the past (which were usually ascribed to the demonic design of a rival group to shame the masquerade affected) or for pure aesthetic reasons, sometimes metal pipes or poles are used. The size of the stage and materials used are essentially determined by the

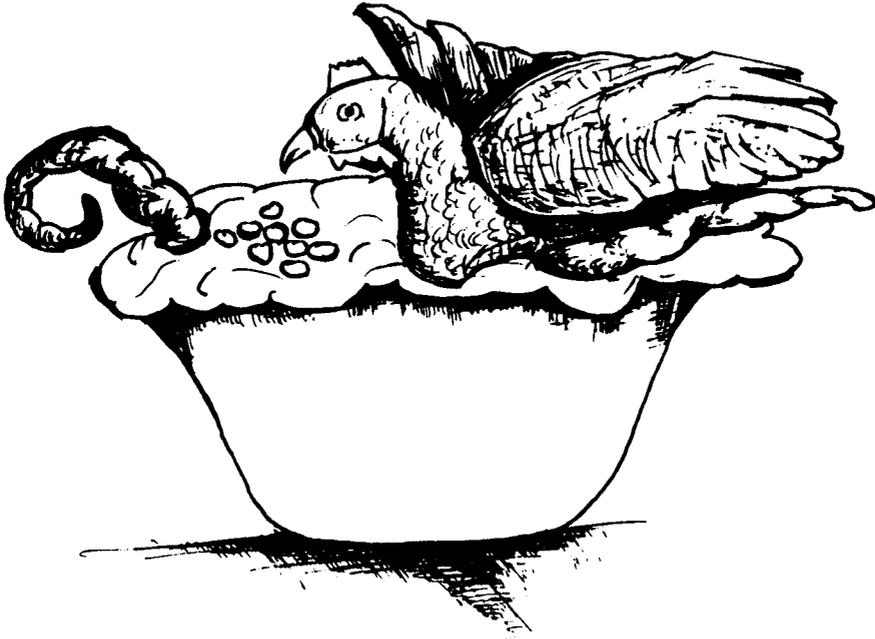


Fig.4. *Amututu*: A Big Charm Object Designed for Spiritual Protection.

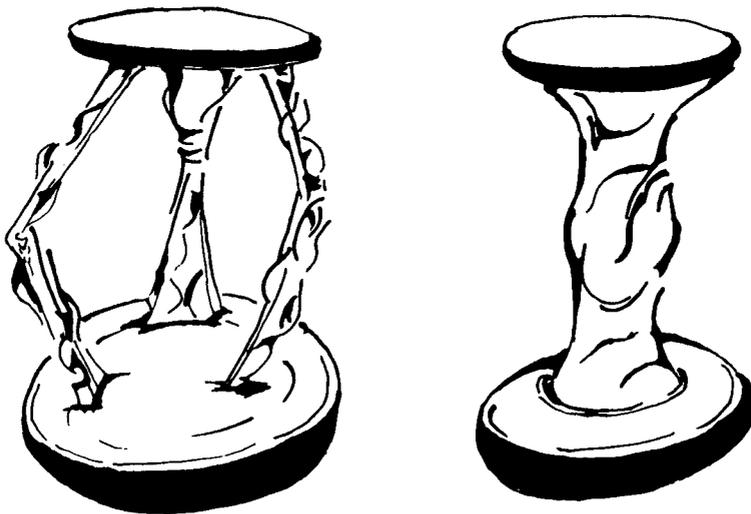


Fig.5. Traditional Stools Fortified with Charms.

financial and numerical strength of the group.

On the stage, there are some fixed props that could be considered as stage props. These are mostly medicinal and ritual objects, which include sculptural carvings, mirrors buried in charms (usually hung on the vertical poles), and *Amututu*⁽⁴⁾ (a big charm object where the spiritual potency of the masquerade is enshrined; Fig. 4). Sometimes, medicinal traditional stools (Fig. 5) are kept on the stage for the masquerade to sit on when the custodian is advanced in age.

Matters of decorations and adornments are taken with much seriousness by the organisers of this performance. Even though they are not used to express or establish any artistic thought as found in modern theatre practice, the end results always carry a unique design. Decorative materials range from big banners to a variety of flags (the Nigerian National Flag inclusive) in outlandish colours that are harmoniously arranged all over the performance venue.

III. Lighting

As a night performance, the need for proper illumination for the stage and the venue has always been given careful attention. A brief examination of the development of the lighting systems for this performance will vitiate this observation.

Perhaps the earliest source of light used was from *Opomo*. It is a special stick that burns very slowly when set on fire and thus found suitable for durable lighting. Many of such sticks were gathered to last the performance. *Opomo* was the main source of domestic lighting during a period. This further concretises the now obvious fact that the festival has been undergoing changes as dictated by societal development.

From *Opomo*, *Ogudube* was introduced. *Ogudube* is a lighting system that uses palm oil as source of energy. Some quantity of cotton wool is placed on a metal plate with an upright handle specially designed for this purpose. Some palm oil is added and lit. To keep *Ogudube* burning, palm oil is regularly added with a post-herd that holds down the slowly burning wick. *Ogudube* finds equivalent expression in *Oguso* (Yoruba), *Gudugbe* (Okun-Yoruba), *Tunja* (Ibo) and *Emu* (Igala). There later came the use of hurricane lamps, pressure lamps, gas lamps and electrical general lighting service lamps. Halogen lanterns have also now been added. Presently, halogen lanterns, gas and pressure lamps are often used together. The last two lamps have become more relevant during the intermission procession that takes the masquerade and a good number of his supporters away from the main performance venue.

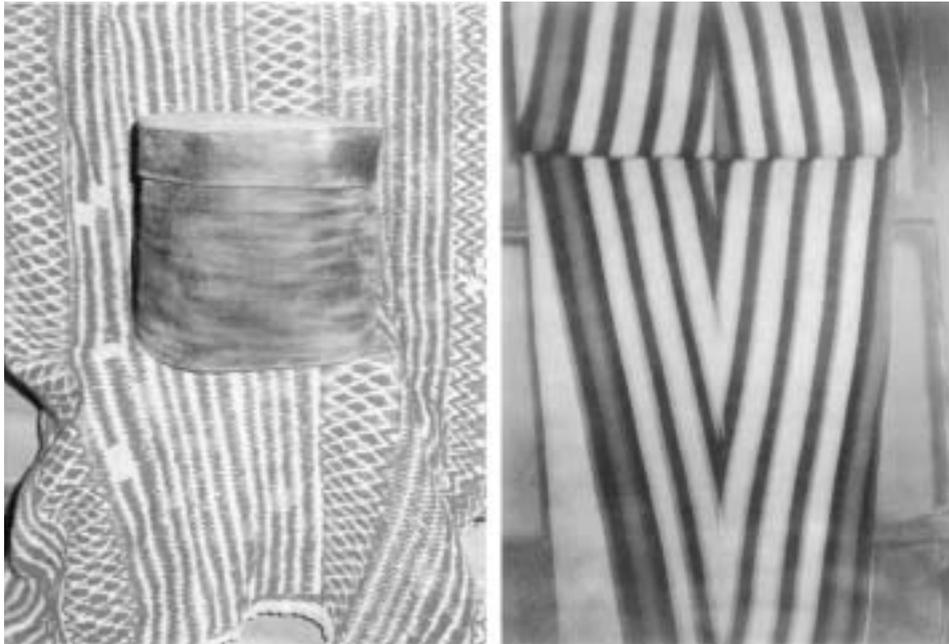
So far, there is no remarkable attempt at creative lighting. What obtains for now is straight lighting for general illumination on the performance venue and stage alike. This can be creatively controlled if modern stage lighting concept is introduced and harmonised with the unique demands of this performance.

IV. Costumes and Accessories

Every participant wears some costume. My discussion will be on the following already identified groups of participants - *Ekurahu*, anchormen, security men, club

members and the participants-audience. Closely considered, costumes and accessories are not used to delineate characters as in the western theatre. Apart from pure aesthetic values, they serve as identity marks for all the key participants. The utilitarian values of some of the accessories are better appreciated in *Ekurahu's* costume as follows.

Ekurahu: Until about twenty years ago, the star characters of this performance were always costumed in pure traditional fabrics. This ranged from *Uba* (calico cloth) to *Itokueta* (all cotton handwoven cloth stripped horizontally in variations of white, black, red and indigo colours). These, according to Ehusani (1991: 170) “express the people’s belief in life, death and the hereafter” which is the centre-point of the celebration.⁽⁵⁾ Sometimes, strips of another cloth type known as *Ubaneito* (Fig. 6) were used. *Ubaneito* is very rich in red wine colour, mixed with intricately spotted gold colour designs, all in geometric patterns with carpet-like thickness. It was a special variation of *Uba*, which usually had milk colour. The derivative prefix in *Uba* to *Ubaneito* explains this. It was imported from a neighbouring Local Government Area, Kabba-Bunu. This was the cloth Picton and Mack (1979: 13) described as “Bunnu red burial cloth” worn by *Ekuraba* commemorating a deceased elder. As the next-door neighbour of Ebira people, the infiltration of such cloth from Bunu into the textile inventory of Ebira people is to be expected. It has also been established that part of the raw materials used for this cloth came from Ebiraland:



Ubaneito
(Inset is *frapa eku*)

Itokueta

Fig.6. Pure Traditional Fabrics.

Ubaneito: Special Calico Cloth

Itokueta: All Cotton Handwoven Cloth

The red wool yarn used in producing the characteristic patterning of these clothes was not indigenous to Bunu. Rather, weavers obtained their red wool yarn from various sources, which included unraveling red wool from red hospital blankets bought in Okene during the colonial period (Renne, 1995: 11).

From the perspective of Ebira understanding, *ubaneito* parades deep supernatural powers. It is hand-woven only by postmenopausal women that are spiritually elevated. They weave it only at nights in stark nudity while weeping and shedding tears in the process. This ritual, as generally believed, is aimed to forestall any future bad omen that could befall the weaver because of the strong supernatural essence of the costume. *Ubaneito* protects the wearer from any form of diabolical attack. All these explain why it is very scarce and expensive to procure. According to Renne (1995: 119), the Bunus call *ubaneito Aso ipo* (red cloth) or sometimes *Aso buruku* (bad or evil cloth), and it is woven exclusively by men who had the supernatural power to see “both sides”, men “with four eyes” (Olojumerin). The men who wove this cloth in the bush needed these supernatural powers to counter the deadly character of this cloth:

Several people said that when this cloth was displayed, it moaned or hummed, calling for blood. If a sacrifice was not forthcoming, a person in the house or associated with the cloth would die. One man who formerly wove it described weaving it in a special place in the bush, outside the village. A goat would be sacrificed every day before weaving began. Otherwise, he said, the weaver’s blood would dry up in his veins (Renne, 1995: 120).

In the same work, Renne (1995: 110) described *aso ipo* as “a group of five predominantly red cloth woven on vertical, single-heddle, nontreadle looms by the Bunu Yoruba women and men.” This negates her earlier position that ascribes the weaving of *aso ipo* to men alone. She further submitted that four of the “five predominantly red cloth,” *ebe*, *ifale*, *oja* and *abata* (from the word *ajibata*) had no special restriction on who could weave them or the process hidden in anyway. But the fifth cloth, *aponuonyin*, was however restricted to men alone. “It could not be woven by women but had to be woven in the bush by men” (pp. 111-112). Perhaps it is the restriction placed on *aponuonyin* that Renne has loosely ascribed to *aso ipo*. Her arguments could therefore be considered tentative, as there are seeming contradictions.

The major difference arising from Ebira and Bunu perspectives of the cloth is that postmenopausal women are responsible for the weaving process of *ubaneito* while men are responsible for that of *Aso ipo*. A researcher and a native of Bunuland, Olu Obafemi, in an interview made the following clarifications:

I am into Bunu culture and also as a participant in the history of Bunu, I know that there is a lot of mysteries surrounding the production of *aso ipo*... Originally *aso ipo* was woven specially as a sacred material by men of sacred means and powers, the *adaunshes* - the makers and completers of wondrous deeds. But by and by as socio-cosmic functions became further delineated or further categorised, women, especially

women of no mean means, also acquired a lot of sacred functions and responsibilities, which constituted a balance of forces, a force of equipoise in society. Such women attained such level that the responsibility of weaving *aso ipo* became theirs... I know that it has been transferred mostly from the realms of masculine responsibility to the feminine gender for quite sometimes. The only thing I think anybody should emphasise is its sacredness, its esoterism and its cultus. In any case, we get to a level among the Bunu people, the people of powers, where men and women become undifferentiated. There are ceremonies, even in the preparation for obaship, in which it gets to a plane where the women have become men (Interview of Obafemi by author, 1999).

These are profound statements that seek to project the metaphysical force behind *aso ipo* rather than the gender distinction in its production. By and large, the Bunu cosmic view reveals that at one time or the other men and women have been associated with the production process. Therefore, the Ebiraland perception that only women of elevated metaphysical essences weave the *ubaneito* can hold sway. This position is perhaps strengthened by the fact that in Ebiraland, weaving is an industry traditionally dominated by women. More so, the original supernatural powers Ebiraland cosmology ascribes to women is perceived to manifest in the cloth and therefore renders it difficult to associate men with the weaving.

Ubaneito and all other costumes are kept in *Irapa eku* (ashbin-like traditional wardrobe. Fig. 6). If put under lock it forces itself open because of the supernatural force of *ubaneito*. With certain rituals, the cloth is also allegedly capable of produc-



Fig. 7. *Izeyin*: Small Clinking Bells.

ing rain, regardless of the season of the year, when brought out of the *Irapa* with positive intentions.

Today, industrially manufactured textile materials are often preferred, especially the expensive types, Guinea brocade for instance. Traditional woven costumes are rarely worn today, but mostly resorted to on divine instructions from the oracle.

The costume design includes baggy trousers to allow free movements for dance and other stage displays. The top is equally roomy and free with warped sleeves, if handwoven. This tails out to about six inches beyond the length of the wearer's hands. The head is not masked since women are forbidden to watch this night performance.⁶ Many wear shirts and neck ties as inner wears before this top. The use of caps is optional. Tall red woollen caps that stand erect on the head (*Aja*) are often used when desired. Some are also sometimes turbaned like Islamic Clerics

The major accessories that go with this costume are *Izeyin* (small clinking bells, Fig. 7) and *Ireha* (metal gongs, Fig. 8). *Izeyin* (about 300 pieces) are sewn in beautiful layers to another piece of cloth, which is worn and tied to the chest of the masquerade performer, while *Ireha* are tied together in strings of four or more. These are tied to the waist in layers. Sometimes, they wear *Ihevere* (metal rattles) on their ankles. All these are used to enhance the rhythm of their dance and to give colour to the overall musical design.

Anchormen are usually costumed in uniform bright coloured apparel. The style varies every year. Fabrics are freely chosen too. The same thing happens to the Club Members. Their own costumes are chosen on age grade basis, all in contrast to one

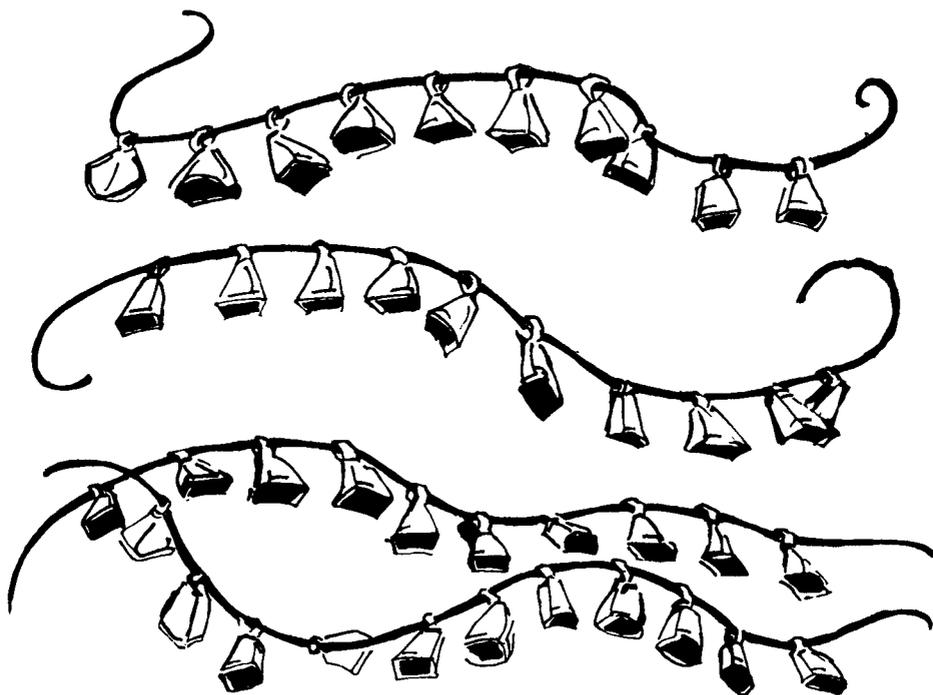


Fig.8. *Ireha*: Metal Gongs.

another and that of the anchormen. The security men are often costumed in Khaki overall and hard boots. Other spectators freely costume themselves as in a carnival. Some look weird and grotesque while others are just unique in simplicity. Some also wear hunter's costumes and special attire inherited from their great grandfathers. These are treasures because:

Old cloths kept and handed down from ancestors are associated with past beliefs and practices. Their value is derived from this connection with the past and with the number of individuals previously associated with these cloths (Renne, 1995: 6).

Besides, there is no better time to use them than during this ancestral festive performance. Perhaps through the use of this cloth, the wearer has a psychological fulfilment of reuniting with his ancestral past which opens way to several other benefits like reassurance of continued supernatural intervention in shaping the course of his existence for good. This is a feeling that engenders positive attitude to life. No amount of money can achieve this. Weiner (1985) is therefore absolutely correct to have described this sedimented value of cloth as "inalienable wealth."

The common paraphernalia carried by many of these participants are brooms (*ohi*) and local fans (*ipepe*), which evoke a rich spectacle, all for aesthetic reasons.

V. Makeup

The use of makeup does not conform to any clearly defined patterns. Everyone is at liberty to use it as desired, while many shun make-up. When used, it is usually to complement the weird nature of some costumes. Local white and red powders are commonly used to achieve this. Some use *Atovi* (Antimony-powdered black stone - *Tiro* in Yoruba) richly on their lower eyelashes. This is specially prepared to enable the user gain insight into the supernatural realm. It is advisable to dissuade the weak that cannot withstand the generally acclaimed weird nature of the supernatural realm from using it.

VI. Music and Dance

Music is an integral part of Ekuechi festival as found in most other African festivals. In fact, it is the pivot around which other activities in the festival revolve. Songs rendered during this festival are always very rich in entertainment, instructional and philosophical values. These songs touch limitless subject matters but mainly explore social and political themes, while using historical hindsight and philosophical insights to navigate the traditional and moral sensibilities of Ebiraland people. Some songs are satirical with the capacity to enforce social control. They chide and chastise known wrong doers in the society. The latitude of commentaries in these songs is not limited to local issues alone but also preoccupied with national and international matters. The following songs rendered by *Achewuru Anavehi Idoji* and *Arijenu Kuroko* are used to contextualize our claim.

| | |
|---|----|
| (1) Ya va sogu yin du'ya báyi ñ húa vo ñi | 2x |
| Ajaokuta/Itakpe òhíkú áyì òhé yò | 2x |
| Ènévétúyì úyà yásirì | 2x |
| Àhì'ìjova kí yerì údì onì suvo za? | 2x |
| Izá kukoro Èbirá éyín vo tuo | 2x |
| Àáva' nìbò yonì, èné yáné sì moniré ènóvì? | |
| Àáva' nì Gambari, èné yáné sì moniré ènóvì? | |
| Àáva' nì Yoba yò, èné yáné sì moniré ènóvì? | |
| Ebira vi jevú Nigeria | 2x |
| Counterfit èkèhì anávàha. | 2x |

(Achewuru Anavehi, 1986: vol. I)

(Translation⁽⁷⁾)

Having found wealth our suffering deepens
 Our forefathers found Ajaokuta/Itakpe
 What is our lot but suffering?
 Ask Government what is our ranking in the project?
 Ebiras have no say in the project sited in their land
 If sited in Iboland, who can try it?
 If sited in Hausaland, who can try it?
 If sited in Yorubaland, who can try it?
 Ebira is a counterfeited coin of Nigeria
 Counterfeit, worthless money rejected.

Analysis: Ajaokuta Steel Company and Iron Ore Mining Company, Itakpe are two giant federal government projects situated in Ebiraland because of the large deposit of good quality iron ore found in the area. These projects are the bedrock of Nigeria's industrialisation. Since the projects were established around 1978, most sensitive positions are often occupied by non-indigenes despite the fact that there are several Ebira people qualified to occupy such positions. The demand is not that all sensitive positions must be given to Ebira indigenes but a fair sharing formula may be observed so that the people can have a sense of belonging. This way, they can adequately monitor the progress of the project.

Today, several billions of Naira have been sunk into the projects and it is not known yet when they would be completed to start full operations. Most of the non-indigenes who were appointed to head the projects only succeeded in killing them through sabotage, grand connivance to loot the funds meant for the projects, and this gave way for theft and vandalism of important structural installations. Perhaps, it was during the tenure of Alhaji Idrees Attah as the head of the Ajaokuta Steel Project that the steel ventures recorded tremendous success. It was this period, for instance, that the company started the production of iron rods and casting of special machine spare parts. This was an Ebira man who saw the project as his own and thus was committed to ensure success. His reward for this monumental success was sudden retirement.⁽⁸⁾ All he laboured to build were destroyed thereafter. There has been no production for the past eight years, salaries cannot be paid and more installations are consistently being vandalised. This also calls to mind the crisis in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, which questions the criminal neglect of the indigenes

of the area. They neither have say in nor benefit from the wealth nature bestowed their land with. Oil prospecting licenses are given to the majority of non-indigenes with few or no indigenes considered worthy and competent to prospect oil.

The Ebira and the Niger Delta people are minority tribes in Nigeria. The minorities in Nigeria are often neglected, while the three major tribes of Ibo, Hausa and Yoruba receive fair treatment. This is why Achewuru has intoned that if the steel projects were situated in the land of any of these three tribes, managerial attitude would have been on a more cautious side.

The above song expresses the mind of an average Ebira person while exposing the attitude of Nigerian Government (often headed by the major tribes) to minority tribes and their God-given wealth. The song therefore, has both local and national relevance.

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|------|----------------------------------|
| (2) Soja ési voòtù wenhi | 2x | |
| Èné yáné kak'emèdiví | 2x | |
| Shut up Ózì óní ózì óní | | |
| Ùsè sort up ózì óní ózì óní | | |
| Ód'èni v'àhu ena | } 2x | (Achewuru Anavehi, 1984: vol. I) |
| Ézì jùwuresú | | |
| Ód'èni v'àhu ena. | | |

(Translation)

The military doesn't come to power by vote
 Who can then condemn their high handedness?
 Shut up you this young fellow!
 Quickly shut up young fellow!
 Their laws are firm on four legs
 They can behead you
 Their laws are firm on four legs.

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| (3) Sójà ó vótè èkèhì kéné éwánwu hiazono | |
| Ìjòva aniyèyè ìjòv'úmáyiye yòni | |
| Òrósí òni Kòkórí mé ána hùvàní kùreka | |
| Òz'ókúh'òni Badamasi mé ána hùvàní kùreka | |
| Òz'órosì, ó vâàrekèhì huavò óya ni | |
| Òz'ókúhà ó vâàrekèhì huavò óyani. ⁽⁹⁾ | (Achewuru Anavehi, 1981: vol. II) |

(Translation)

Military's budgetary votes are chilly
 Yesteryear governance is a matter of regret
 The eroded pathway Kokori bridged that instigated argument
 The flooded pathway Badamasi corrected that instigated argument
 Eroded pathways take much more money to amend today
 Flooded pathways take much more money to correct today.

Analysis: Song (2) foregrounds military autocracy and their unquestionable dictatorial tendencies. Achewuru was obviously lending voice to the popular call for institutionalisation of democratic system of government the world over and particu-

larly in Nigeria. Song (3) exposes the financial recklessness of military dictatorship. For instance, money spent on some capital projects during the civilian government in Nigeria that were considered astonishing is today minuscule when compared to what military governments often vote for similar projects.

- | | |
|--|----------------------------------|
| (4) Àkàmáwu omò'zì réyí Anébìrà we renìni? | 2x |
| Sadam ozí Kuwaití dóko onà dówá ogu nì | 2x |
| Ibush o híó áví dónowu vùrù vùrù | } 2x |
| Ò òkósí várema áví dónowu vùrù vùrù | |
| Sédáka vána váví remanì kè? | } 2x |
| Ìràz'ónó | |
| Sédáka vána váví remanì kè? | } 2x |
| Isé'kèhì ónóyìn óvèsìduha inanì ò | |
| Ogu sadamì óvèsìduha inanì ò | } 2x |
| Àzání vót'okà shó húní'jówà nì o | |
| Òsenì okà shó húní'jówà nì o. | (Arijenu Kuroko, 1991: vol. III) |

(Translation)

Obstinacy has ruined this fellow; can you fathom this Epira people?
 Sadam wants to annex Kuwait and inherit her wealth
 Bush cautioned him but he remained adamant
 Retrace your steps, but he remained adamant
 What was the aftermath?
 The gulf war
 What was the aftermath?
 Expensive infrastructures were destroyed
 Sadam's wealth were destroyed
 His people then agitated for his removal from Government
 Hussein also canvassed for his removal from Government.

Analysis: Arijenu records for Epira people the gulf war experience with sufficient attempt to capture the roles of some of the key figures of that war: George Bush of America, Sadam Hussein of Iraq and the late King Hussein of Jordan. Even though the custodian is not lettered, he receives information on national and international events through his anchormen and key club members that are educated.

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| (5) Aláfíá ána ví moto anava shò zà zùsè zeze | 2x |
| Ámanavo ásó nà jaàmù | |
| Òzùse gódó | |
| Kú hé vásí gara o | |
| Òzùse gódó | |
| Kú hé vásí gara o. | (Achwuru Anavehi, 1981: vol. I) |

(Translation)

Sound health is the vehicle responsible for human movement
 May it not be accidented
 In order to move far
 Otherwise human soul would be destroyed
 In order to move far

Otherwise human soul would be destroyed.

- (6) Ààdéyéngu Idanga éve ékúhì Ekuechi
 Idóndòká'na yìn zòmi yído chì rérenu
 Àáyé wa do'chi rérenu wà và rema
 Isú
 Àáyé wa do'chi rérenu wà và rema. (Achwuru Anavehi, 1981: vol. I)

(Translation)

It is Ekuechi festival day and Idanga has not shown up
 A ranked policeman collects bribes
 I wish you accepted bribe and retreat
 Death
 I wish you accepted bribe and retreat.

- (7) Abí só ozà mé sé vé dó'zo máayén wón meta ? 2x
 Ìńke'mí vá hú reku ononì vo
 Ìńke'mí vá hú reku ononì vo
 Así me pò ñkóho né ni chi rezi dé esi hiayi
 Así me pò ñkóho né ni chi rezi Ò dé esi hiayi. (Achwuru Anavehi, 1981: vol. I)

(Translation)

Why is it impossible to actualise one's plan fully in life?
 I shall one day cease to be Eku custodian
 I shall one day cease to be Eku custodian
 And be committed to mother earth and be forgotten.
 And be committed to mother earth o and be forgotten.

- (8) Wáyí sí me sí híawun'su èwunì jamáa? 2x
 Ewurozó ózè obónótu óno sùhúrehe 2x
 Ayí ohí
 Óyéáne nàà mè uremúvó
 Ayí ohí. (Achwuru Anavehi, 1981: vol. I)

(Translation)

Do you know why I am scared of death gentlemen?
 You might be friendly with people but the moment you die
 It is forgotten
 They can begin to betray you
 It is forgotten.

- (9) Òpìsá'nadárehi òtúrósá dó su tebèba 2x
 Etéèesu kà shó chíváyonee 2x
 Kù'sehìra ózii dó su tebèba
 Chívé.
 Kù'sehìra Ózìfí dó su tebèba
 Chívé. (Achwuru Anavehi, 1979: vol. II)

(Translation)

The wealthy owner of a skyscraper who dies on the topmost floor

Earth demands that his body be brought down to it
 You are only being arrogant to have died on the topmost floor
 Come down
 You are only being arrogant to have died on the topmost floor
 Come down.

Analysis: The last five songs above (all from Achewuru) probe into the essence of human existence while extrapolating the inevitable encounter with death, the ultimate indiscriminate leveller of all human souls. Song (5) emphasised the relevance of sound health to good living and long life. In (6) Achewuru posthumously remembers Idanga, the custodian of Okevere who was his archrival. His death actually took the shine off the superlative performance of Achewuru because without a competent rival, the worth of his artistic performance could not be put into correct perspective. Achewuru knows as much, and therefore wished death - the executioner of divine laws - could be bribed to spare him (Idanga) just like some Nigerian law enforcement agents would bend the law for bribery. As if predicting his own death eight years later, Achewuru revealed the helplessness of man when death comes calling (song 7). The process of self-actualisation is a continuous one and one never feels entirely fulfilled before death comes knocking to put an end to one's dreams and aspirations. And once one dies, he is often forgotten with his ideals and erased from human memory. Friends with whom you shared ideals while alive can begin to controvert them (song 8). Life is vanity is the message in song 9. No matter one's level of wealth, the ultimate end is to be committed to mother earth.

Achewuru's passion for the philosophy of living and dying cannot be quantified. Before the demise of the custodian, some amount of attention was always dedicated to such songs in every performance outing of Achewuru. This is why Ehusani (1991: 161) aptly described him as "a living legend because of the very profound insight into the meaning of life and death, which were always reflected in his songs."

The aesthetic qualities of these songs lie in their free-flowing poetic contents and vibrant philosophical dimensions. Each song is capable of provoking multiplinous interpretations, recoverable often times long after performance. Therefore, in the bid to ensure that many of these songs are understood, at least contextually, songs are repeated several times during the performance. If "repetition embodies creativity" as opined by Drewal (1992: 187), then the monotonous nature of these songs could be considered as a creative and aesthetic design.

Apart from establishing the festive mood of the event, music is also used uniquely to provoke and challenge the singing masquerade into an all-consuming dance feat by the master drummer. This could last for thirty minutes. The rhythmic patterns and tempo of the instruments are varied and orchestrated with clapping by the spectators resulting in a vivacious excitement for the audience. This is when everybody present is at their best in dancing as the dance jig of the singing masquerade instinctively stimulates others to express themselves in fanciful dance steps.

The dances present an innate picture of a choreographed or rehearsed artistry. There could be as many as ten different movements variously expressed in groups and individually. Basic description of the dance done by the singing masquerade

suffices here. It involves the jerking of shoulders up and down, inward and outward curving of the chest on which the jingling bells (*Izeyin*) are tied. Along with the twisting and wriggling of waist, loaded with layers of metal gongs (*ireha*)-the paraphernalia produce soft strident and hard melodious sounds respectively, but in strict rhythmical synchronisation with the drumming. It also involves stylised movements of the legs and hands, which are beautifully varied as the drumming dictates. This is certainly an area requiring further choreographic investigation for a more fulfilling artistic presentation.

Traditional drum sets are the basic musical instruments used here. These include, *Obene* (*Omele* in Yoruba), *Ugogoyin* (Hourglass talking drum) and *Okanga Obanyin/Oweyi* (cylindrical skin covered talking drum, master/small). They all belong to the family of *membranophones* because they are all covered with animal skin membrane. Other accompanying instruments include *Ayiha* (rattles or *sekere*), *Uwse* (twin gong) and *Opanyin* (horn trumpet), which is occasionally blown. Apart from these, there is another unique drum, *Anuva*, which is not part of the main orchestra. It is a skin-covered pot drum. To be appreciated, all other forms of drumming are stopped when the *Anuva* is in use. The base is an earthenware pot. It is played with some metal rattles on fingers and wrists. Played at night, the sound is capable of reaching out to people within a radius of half a kilometre. It is also believed to have a ritual and mystical import. The entire musical orchestra produces good melodies that most times pulsate with intense and arresting rhythms (Figs. 9-15 for some of the musical instruments).

FUNCTIONAL VALUES

Sociologically, Ekuechi festival serves a wide variety of functions in Ebiraland. Scenes in the festival mirror the society, preserve its legends, its lores and ethos, explore its problems and criticise its weaknesses. In terms of form and content, therefore, the festival, like drama, evolves from the society; it is not imposed upon it. This is why the significance of the audience cannot be played down. Ekuechi festival attracts a very large audience from the immediate locality, neighbouring villages and from other remote areas. For the Ebira people, the festival serves as the core of their existence. It has become an annual magnetic force, which attracts many Ebiras to their roots from all over the country and even beyond:

If an Ebiraman goes home only once in a year, it is mostly likely for the purpose of participating in the festival. In fact, people are known to have travelled back home from abroad for the purpose of the festival (Emielu, 1982: 46).

Ekuechi festival is the most eagerly awaited and the most remembered throughout Ebiraland. This is because it engenders togetherness and brotherhood and fosters ethnic cohesion among the Ebira people. It is also a stock taking period for an average Ebiraman, when life's travails and successes are reflected upon:

Whatever you do during the year, it is during this time of the year that people come to



Fig. 9. *Ijabana* or *Obene*.



Fig. 10. *Ugogoyin*.



Fig. 11. *Okanga Obanyin*.



Fig.12. *Ayiha.*



Fig.13. *Uwse.*



Fig.14. *Opanyin.*



Fig.15. *Anuva.*

account for all that they have been doing during the past months. They came together, and rejoice together, drink together, play together and make all sorts of merriment - Fari Ajannah in an interview with Shamoos Adeiza, (Adeiza, 1994).

Furthermore, the festival engenders economic drive because it encourages mass plantation of crops (yam, beans, palm produce, corn, pepper, vegetable, rice) to be used during the festival as sacrifices, as ritual objects, and food to entertain guests. This therefore implies hard work on the part of the farmers who see it as their responsibility to provide these food items for the whole land at this crucial period.

Wealth sharing has become an enduring feature of this festival. This happens at several levels. First, farmers come home for the festival with their bumper harvests.

Parts of these they share among the people in the neighbourhood. Thus some farmers in the neighbourhood receive gifts of crops they did not harvest. This means variety and plenty of food items in the whole community for celebration. Secondly, the main actors of the festival receive gifts from several households according to their performances and talents. This is reminiscent of the practice of the *Alarinjo* itinerant theatre groups in the southwest Nigeria.⁽¹⁰⁾ Sometimes, the costumes of some Eku-singers and other financial obligations are taken care of by any rich man willing to do so. This resembles the Greek's impresarios who financed the great Dionysian festival of the Greeks.

Some of the items used in *Ori* where the *Ekurahu* performs rituals have assumed essential roles in the lives of the people. Some of these items are kola nuts, bitter kola, alligator pepper, salt and palm oil. These are all food products with significant functions and properties in this respect. For instance, the *Ekurahu* at this ritual mixes together salt and palm oil (*ohinae*). He tastes some, drops some on his head and feeds the ground with some. Palm oil and salt are the most important cooking ingredients of the Ebira. Thus the prayer accompanying this ritual asks for calmness, sweetness of life and joy in the whole land throughout the season. Alligator pepper is used as a counterforce against any danger that might disturb the festival. Prayers are offered with kola nuts for long life and protection, and are shared among the audience.

The belief that ancestral masquerades are spirits and not human confers influence on such masquerades and raises the people's imagination to the point of ecstasy. Thus like "Father Christmas," the spirits, cloaked in ancestral masquerades, usher a load of gifts, albeit spiritual, on the people. They appear as if by their contact with the world beyond during their transition, they had acquired rare powers, which enable them to discover their iniquities while on earth. Thus their message to the living takes the form of warnings against evil and witchcraft, and threatens women who defile their marital beds with the wrath of the ancestral spirits. Such warnings are usually very effective deterrents. Ekuechi festival provides leverage for social control and the submission of the womenfolk to their male counterparts. Most marriages are contracted at this time of the season. On their part, the people reward the spirits' guidance and protection with gifts in cash and kind.

That the festival offers happiness and aura of blissful existence cannot be overemphasised. It is characterised with free mixing, gaiety, a parade of latest apparels and special and sumptuous dishes. Ekuechi festival is about the most singular occasion that magnets the spiritual urge of Ebira people who must defy all avoidable odds to come home to participate in the festivities. It is a period of restoring links with home to rejoice with relations and friends. Celebrated with all pomp and pageantry, Ekuechi promotes the spirit of "Pax Ebira" as an index of cultural unity.

The Koran and the Bible appear to be at variance with this aspect of Ebira culture, but the aura of celebration and jubilation that grip the whole town during the festival infers that people are not alienated from tradition regardless of their religious learning because, according to Frawn Boar,

Tradition is the totality of mental and physical reactions and activities that characterised the behaviour of individuals comprising a social group collectively and individ-

ually in relation to their natural environment, to the groups, to members of the groups itself and to reach individual himself (cited in Morohunfolu, 1970: 94).

The general attitude at this time appears to reflect the Biblical maxim: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (*Holy Bible*, 1984: 689). It is interesting to observe that several Churches and Islamic groups in Ebiraland in their modes of worship are now adopting Ekuechi musical style, both in songs and instruments. The import is to win and retain more converts since every Ebera person seems to have innate attachment to Ekuechi. This way, a new convert would not feel completely detached from his cultural root. With this level of commitment, it might be misleading to see the festival strictly as a religious practice. It is rather a fulfilment of social obligation that is rooted within the belief system of the people, which also reconciles them with their ancestral descent while foregrounding their cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION

Traditionally, less attention is given to the aesthetic qualities of all the theatre elements identifiable in the performance of the singing masquerade during Ekuechi festival. The general air of civilisation and modernisation pervading the whole universe has also over-taken the organisers of this festival performance. The competitive factor that is considered in preparing for the *Ekuechi*'s performances is also a crucial point of note. These two factors have greatly affected the authentic nature of the festival in many respects. Even though the core of the festival is still intact, many of the features have undergone serious transformation. It is almost certain that Ododo and Obaji will hardly recognise the present state of the festival as part of the *Ekuechi* Cult they instituted, many generations ago. This is not decrying the transformation per se but acknowledging how the modernising process has diffused our authentic past. However, some artistic aspects of the *Ekuechi* performance have latent potentials that could be improved upon within the context of the festival. The areas of costume, lighting, stage scenography and dance are the most obvious. If the organisers take a full advantage of modern theatre practice, the entire festival is a potential major tourist attraction with outstanding economic and material values for the people.

Despite the energetic physical nuances sometimes expressed by some active participants, it is a festival, which has attracted several national and international observers. With appropriate technical modifications, the festival may be shown in other lands. If the organisers take bold steps to actualise its rich potentials, it will attract further organisational, corporate and government attention. This actualisation will save the festival from degenerating into a folkloric or archival status. As Gumucio-Dagron (1994: 87) posited:

A culture that is static is not a living culture, it becomes folklore, a falsified manifestation of old practices where only the form remains visible only the facade appears, emptied of any creative content.

Admittedly, there is so much to do in this respect just as there are several derivable benefits. On the whole, the various aspects of Ekuechi festival, moving from the sublime to the grotesque, provoke intense entertainment, rich and diverse theatrical and performative attributes such that contemporary theatrical experience can benefit from.

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NOTES

- (1) *Onokus* are women born under very special circumstance. Whenever an *Onoku* is born, whether at home or at the maternity, a multitude of small hymenopterous insects such as ants (*ijija*) or snakes appear mysteriously around the mother and the child to welcome her arrival. They do no harm to the baby, the mother or anyone for that matter. This symbolises the birth of an *Onoku*. They are predestined and super-human. After some time, the animals disappear on their own. Later in life, at about age fifteen and above, proper initiation rites are performed for the *Onoku*. Usually dressed in white attire with traditional accessories such as beads (neck and wrists), parrot feathers (fixed on their hair), fan, the *Onoku* give spiritual support to masquerades by prescribing some sacrifices and rites to be observed to avert imminent danger.
- (2) The last ban imposed on the festival in 1996 was lifted in 1999. Indeed there were Ekuechi performances in December of that year and year 2000.
- (3) *Ori* can be equated to a god. There are several of them within the community. They inhabit places such as trees, streams, rocks, and junctions where four roads meet (crossroads). Their particular places of habitation are discovered through divination or mysterious occurrences around the spot, for example, accidents, hens laying, incubating and hatching eggs without a recognisable ownership. *Ori* spirit functions primarily to protect its devotees against known or imagined enemies. They return to the source in double measure all evil machinations hatched against a devotee. Blissful existence for all those committed to the *Ori* is thus assured. If you commit yourself to an *Ori* spirit, you are insured against human evil, and also forbidden from doing evil against anybody. If you do, the hatched plan shall become your lot. There are prescribed sacrifices to be consistently observed. This must not be missed or else *Ori* spirit will react violently against the devotee, in the form of absurd and devastating experiences including business wreckage, flood overrunning his farm, or whirlwind removing his rooftop. It can even consume him and his homestead. *Ori* is usually impervious to appeasement when angry, until it has sufficiently demonstrated its anger through wanton human and property destruction. Their level of comportment and anger varies. People take this into consideration before committing themselves to any particular *Ori*.
Every custodian of *Ekurahu* maintains a relationship with *Ori* spirit which ensures his constant cordial attunement with the supernatural realm, acting as intermediary between him and the divine essence, God Almighty. As may be prescribed from time to time the custodian offers sacrifices to the *Ori*. This ranges from the killing of sacrificial animals such as cock, ram, or he-goat, to his pouring of libation of oil mixed with salt (*Ohinae*) at *Inori*. Achewuru, for instance, relates with *Ori Ogana*, which inhabits a wide expanse

- of rock, while that of Okevere is *Ori Dagidibo* which is located between two big baobab trees.
- (4) At critical moments the *Ekurahu* depends on his *Amututu* to survive. He either wears the *Amututu* on his head or a charm object is taken from it and used on the masquerade performer by the anchormen. The potency of *Amututu* is physically emphasised by a live cock it holds spell bound without fetters. Even if the cock is assaulted, it cannot move away from the *Amututu*.
 - (5) It is important to add that several units of *Itokueta* are often displayed during the funeral of a deceased elder while lying in state. Since this is an expensive cloth, the number of units displayed gives information on the financial and social status of the departed. It is a celebration of self-fulfilment, family progress and not mourning, as the departed is believed to be transiting to a higher realm of human existence. The red colour in this cloth also attest to this reasoning because for Epira people, "red is a colour associated ...with success and achievement with which they overlap but do not coincide" (Picton and Mack, 1979: 9).
 - (6) Even though the head is not masked, it is significant to note that *Ekurahu* is still called a masquerade. This can be explained with the understanding that it belongs to the *Ekumaskerade* cult, which was primarily instituted to check the excessive powers of women. Out of all these masquerade characters, it is only *Ekurahu*, *Ekumahate* and *Akatapa* that women are forbidden to see even in masks. These three only come out at night and do not wear masks. Even men generally cannot stand the sight of *Ekumahate*, except elders of about seventy years and above because they are closer to the ancestral figures than mundanity. The others-*Ekuechichi*, *Ekukise* and *Ekuba* - that can come out in the afternoon are masked to prevent women from knowing masquerading secrets. The mysterious thing about *Ekurahu* is that even without a mask, an inquisitive woman who may want to steal a glance will not be able to identify the custodian. And such attempt is usually an invitation to insanity. Story has it that one woman so attempted to steal a look at *Ekurahu* from her window at night but could only see a fig tree on the performance platform with people surrounding it. The next morning she confessed her actions, and became insane. She died before the next festival. In this sense *Ekurahu* is still a masquerade to the women folk. However, in modern times some researchers often seek permission to video record the performance of *Ekurahu*. When granted, the *Ekurahu* wears a mask before the recording can proceed. It is around this understanding I am currently developing a concept I call "Facequerade".
 - (7) All translations in this text are mine. However as common with most exercises of translation from orature to literature, my effort here may not adequately capture the linguistic flavour of the original but the senses are well represented, I believe. This is why Catford (1965) also maintains that "equivalence" in translocated materials is non-existent.
 - (8) Alhaji Idrees Attah was once Deputy General Manager of Production. His appointment as the head of the steel project came a few years after this song was rendered. Could it be said that Government was responding to the content of the song?
 - (9) Alhaji Abdul Kokori and Alhaji Badamasi were elected members of federal parliament in Nigeria from Ebiraland during the first republic in 1963.
 - (10) For more information on the *Alarinjo* theatre, see Adedeji (1978).

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