



Eurocentric(ism) and Folk(ism) in Edegborode Festival Performance

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Abstract:

This essay analyses the Edegborode Annual Festival Performance of Sapele, Delta state, Nigeria, as one among the many dramatic performances in Africa, with economic values, vis-a-vis the possibility of adapting the festival into contemporary folk drama using Sam Ukala's *Folkism eight (8) Laws of Aesthetic Response*. There is no doubt about the tourism potential and the economic values present in many Nigerian festival Performances. However, the question of whether traditional African performances can be classified as drama or not still lingers. Adopting traditional African performances into modern African folk drama is also a challenge. It is based on these that this study is carried out. I adopt the ethnographic method of research in carrying out this research. Participant observation and face-to-face interview method was explored. I aim to examine and measure the number of western performative elements like plot, character (isation), music, song, performance arena (stage), and the audience, in the Edegborode Annual Festival Performance, and how these aesthetics fit into modern African folk drama using Folkism as a yardstick. The study shows that the Edegborode festival performance provides entertainment to its audience. Also, its ability to attract over Four Thousand (4000) local tourists within Delta State every year adds economic value to community development. Most importantly, when subjected to the aesthetics of Folkism, the Edegborode annual festival is viable source material for modern folk drama. However, there is a need for a further critical study of the economic and health potentials of the use of traditional herbs and plants in traditional festival performances.

Keywords: Eurocentricism, Edgeborode, Festivals, Folkism Performances

Introduction

Drumming, dancing, songs, belief systems, values, norms, and practices are vital components of culture that need to be preserved and maintained for posterity. Traditional festival celebrations, help in the preservation and maintenance of cultures (Adjeketa 2019: 146). Also, Songs, mime, dance, and impersonation which occupy significant aspects of the festival, are what help the people connect significantly to their past (Omoko, 2016, p.93). Hardly any community exists in Nigeria that does not have one form of performance or the other. The Akata Benue Fishing Festival, the Eyo Festival, representing the proud part of the Yoruba community, the popular Argungun Fishing Festival which allows some Northern Nigerian tribes to compete and have fun, the fun-filled Calabar Carnival, the Igbo New Yam Festival, the popular Osun Osogbo Festival of the Osun People, the popular Egungun Festival (Benjamin, 2012, Apenda, 2015, Hafeez, 2023), the Tigbotigboti Facekura¹ performance of the Okwejeba people of Delta State, are a few among the many festivals in Nigeria. The Edegborode Annual Festival performance is one among the many African Festival performances that have received poor scholarship. Although the spectacles presented in the Edegborode festival performances, the entertainment, and the economic value are mind-boggling, the festival has yet to receive international recognition. Despite the many benefits these festivals present, some theatre scholars argue that they are still in their ritual form, and until the element of mimetics becomes obvious, they do not qualify to be called drama, therefore, killing the desire in some playwrights to recreate these festivals into modern Nigerian folk drama.

The question some African scholars are asking is, what makes a real drama? If these festival performances do not qualify as drama, what can be done to them to qualify? Would the application of the eight laws in Sam Ukala's theory of folkism be efficient when recreating African festival performances into modern folk drama? Based on these I examine the Edegborode Annual Festival as having the potential of a modern African folk drama using western performative elements and Folk(ism). This research aims to examine the Edegborode Annual Festival performance and locate the western performative elements and Folk(ism) dramatic composition present in the performance. Prominently, however, if the festival could be

¹ Maskless characters conceived and perceived as masquerades (see Sunday Ododo (2008) FACEKURADE, Cultural Studies, 22:2, 284-308 print

recreated into a folk play using Folk(ism) aesthetic principles. Lastly, if the festival's plot, characters, costume, music/ dance, performance arena, audience, etc., would make the possibility of recreating the performance into modern African Folk Drama.

Theatrical framework

Eurocentric(ism)

Drama is a unique tool to explore and with which to express human feelings. It is an essential form of behaviour in all cultures and fundamental human activity. Drama is human's imitation of the action of their fellow human. It is the imitation of an action that is complete. This definition is drawn from the Eurocentric worldview. The term, Eurocentrism also known as Eurocentricity or Western-centrism is a worldview that is centered on ngor a biased view that favors it over non-Western civilizations (Hobson, 2012: 185). In drama, the term is used to describe dramatic compositions that follow the principle of Aristotle's poetics (Butcher, 2008). While this western idea of drama has changed slightly over the years, scholars still discuss its tenets when talking about what makes the best drama. Though, known today in Africa, Asia, and other continents of the world as Eurocentric it has major elements on which drama of any race and style could be built (only when the Eurocentric idea is not adhered to as sacrosanct). These elements are Plot, Character, Thought, Diction, Music, and Spectacle.

The plot is the story of the play. It is the structure and shaping of events in an orderly arrangement to elicit some response from the audience. The plot is also known as the story or the various happenings in the play. Plot refers to the action. Theodore Hatlen in Emeka Nwabueze (2003: 23) opines that the plot varied from the tightly knit, simple structure of Greek tragedy to the loose episodes of medieval drama, bonded together by theme, to the complicated action of the Elizabethans, to the naturalist attempt to avoid all semblance of structure in slice-of-life plays, and finally to the contemporary experiments in expressionistic, absurd and epic drama that have little regard for disciplined construction.

The person or object portrayed in the play is the character. The central idea or theme of the story is the thought. language include words used by the characters it includes dialect and rhythm. Everything the audience hears from the play, including the words, music, and sound effects

are all categorised under music. Everything the audience sees, including scenery, costumes, makeup, dancing, and pantomime is a spectacle. All the various element of dramatic composition are prominent.

Although the Western idea of drama does not totally fit into African festival performances, some of its elements are still can still be found in modern African drama and traditional African performances. Clark (1981: 60- 62) argued that if drama means the elegant imitation of some action significant to a people, if this means the physical representation of the evocation of one poetic image or a complex of such images, if the vital elements in such representation or evocation are speech, music, ritual, song as well as dance and mime, then, there is drama in plenty of Nigerian traditional festival performances.

Folk(ism)

From the African worldview, imitation is strictly a re-enactment of their past experiences- in times of war or an encounter with some supernatural beings. According to Austin Anigala, African festival performances are community-oriented. This means that the traditional African performance is a communal activity- it is created from the beliefs and customs of the people. The themes of the performance and the production element are dependent on the festival being celebrated (Anigala, 2006: 21). The meaning of Anigala's statement is that since performances in Africa are created from the communal life of the Africans, it is an imitation of the way of life of Africans who have passed on. These performances though evolve from rituals containing dramatic elements capable of future development into full-bodied folk drama. This ideology has made some scholars like Ruth Fenigan (1970) advocate for their transition from their ritualistic state to a more dramatic form. Relevant elements or features suggested by Eurocentric scholars to be the basics of creating any dramatic action from society are present in African festival performances. The audience, dance, mime, magic, and the performance venue, are very important and prominent elements in traditional African performances. Suspense, conflict, and conflict resolution as well as exposition are elements that are present in the plot. When these elements are present in any performance -traditional or otherwise - such performance meets the requirement of what constitutes a true drama-folk drama.



In the quest to link the divide between classical drama, theatre, and African folk plays and performances, Sam Ukala came up with the theory of Folkism. Ukala's theory is hinged on the premise of basing literary plays on the history and customs of native African people, as well as performing them in harmony with the aesthetics of African folktales, symphony, and presentation for easy identification by the host culture (Ukala 1993). To accomplish this aim, Ukala postulates eight laws which are: 1. the law of opening 2. the law of joint performance 3. the law of creativity, free enactment, and responsibility 4. the law of judgment 5. the law of protest against suspense 6. the law of expression of the emotions 7. the law of ego projection and 8. the law of closing (Ukala 1996, Tekena 2018). Much like African folk plays and performances (Edegborode Annual Festival), Ukala's first law would technically remind the audience of the story about to be told sometimes, beginning with a song. Because the festival audience already knows the song, they are excited and moved to join in singing and dancing. Thus, this technique arrests the audience's attention. In his second law of joint performance, rehearsed members of the performance crew are stationed in between the audience invited to the show. Ukala calls this group Members of Audience (MOA). They act out their roles from among the original audience asking and answering questions posed by the other actors performing. To stop the linear presentation of traditional Eurocentric performance where directors and actors would have to follow sacrosanctly what is in the script, Ukala presents creativity, free enactment, and responsibility as an aesthetic law that gives everyone involved in the performance from the director to the actors the freedom to creatively add their interpretation and experience to better the performance. Laws 4 to 7, Ukala hands over criticism to the audience. The audience judges whether the performance is good or bad and then gives their verdict as the performance is on. In explaining these laws he says that they "concern(s) the audience's evaluation of the narrator's abilities and the character's conduct; the audience's questions and comments; their free expression of emotions of grief, pleasure, scorn, fear, and sympathy; and their idiosyncratic interjections aimed at attracting attention to themselves as potential narrators respectively" (Ugwu and Orjinta 2013: 25). As for the eighth law, the narrator whom most times had introduced the performance also closes it in the same way. It is a technique to bring out the moral lessons of the story as is the case in

traditional folktales. Ukala drew this performance aesthetics from Nigerian traditional folk performances like the Edegborode festival (folk) performance.

Research Method

This study is a critical investigation of the Edegborode Festival performance. It adopts the ethnographic method of research to carry out the study. The participant observation technique was explored to collect data (Dewi 2013:44). The researcher interacted with the local audience and recorded all information in a notebook while following up with the festival events. This helped the researcher get first-hand information about the festival performance. The data collected were presented and literarily analysed using western performance mode and Folk(ism) performance aesthetics. The major challenge encountered using this method is restriction. The researcher was neither allowed to enter sacred paces nor allowed to take photographs of the masquerades.

Data Presentation

Edegborode is one among the many Okpe villages in Sapele Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. The people of Edegborode are farmers, fishermen, and petty traders. They are like all other Okpe people in every respect; the only distinguishing factor is the fact that “they have a set of annual festivals, ranging from youth play to very complicated adult performance, which is celebrated separately from all other Okpe general festivals” (Kenneth Eni, 2011: 26). The festival has the attention of the ‘Iben’, the river god with the eldest man in the community as its chief priest.

A few weeks before the festival, an organising committee is set up. They coordinate the activity of the performance as well as the assurance of the safety of the participants. It takes months of strenuous rehearsals before the performance day. Like any theatre production, the rehearsal period is of utmost importance to the success of the performances. The rehearsals take place in a sacred grove. At the rehearsal stage, only initiates are allowed to see and take part. The rehearsal period is a rigorous one that stretches from two to three months or more as the case may be.

After the long weeks of rehearsals come the day of the presentation. The presentation takes place in a public arena and it stretches from morning to evening. The morning is the introductory part of the festival. The

afternoon is the middle while the evening is the conclusion of the performance. The performance usually takes place on the 25th of December with a repeat performance on the 1st of January. The morning performance features the “Agbakara” (Crocodile) and the Oloda (Shark) Masquerade. All are symbols of the gods that live in the water. This set of masquerades dramatizes the struggle for food between the Oloda and the Agbakara in the water. After a heavy downpour, the father Oloda comes out with his family to look for food. After feeding on the smaller fish in the river, the Oloda is prepared to return home. It is at this point the conflict begins. The Agbakara who also is hungry comes out with his family. Because there is not much food remaining in the water for him and his family, he decides to feed on the Oloda. A fight ensues and by chance, the Oloda manages to escape from the clench of the Agbakara with his family. This set of Masquerade is very aggressive. Because of the nature of the Oloda to always care for and protect his wife and children, no one dares to go near any of the Oloda masquerades.

The second part of the performance is the dramatisation of forces that live in the water, which in agreement with other land forces bestow on man potent charms to fight evil forces. This aspect of the performance is packed with songs. The Eloda (Eloda plural, Oloda, singular) Masquerade comes out of the grove, led by the Obo² (chief priest). They move to the Agwele (shrine) where the chief priest pours libation to the gods imploring them to guide the performance to a successful ending. Before this, the Masquerade moves to the performing arena. It is an initiate that fences the performing area with fresh palm leaves. This is to prevent any unclean person from crossing the performance area and also to ward off evil charms. First, the Obo dances around blowing the white Orhe (native chalk) he is holding while reciting incantations. The audience, being part of the performance, sings:

Damu-Urhoró

Ijoro-ebome;e

Damu-Urhoró

“I will spur the giver of wealth and children to action with my ritual song”

² The Edegborode people uses the name, Obo, to represent a traditional chief priest whose specialty is in the application of traditional medicine for healing. The Obo plays the same role as the Dibia among the Igbos and the Babalawo as it is popularly known among the Yoruba’s

As the audience sings this song, the masquerades take their turn to dance and entertain the audience. At this juncture, the Obo returns to the stage, this time singing more fiercely:

Solo: Avbaiforahamero' bara

All: Never.

Solo: Ebesihio' tore merobara-a

All: Utiro...

Solo: You can never see blood when you cut a snail

All; Never

Solo: You can never get blood when you pound the earth

All: Never.

As this song is in progress, the Obo and one of the masquerades demonstrate the potency of traditional medicine. The Obo begins by asking for bottles from the audience which he breaks on a mat. The Obo then lies on the broken bottle with his belly while the masquerades jump on his back, dancing violently without the Obo sustaining any injury. Following the display of his medical dexterity, the Obo and his apprentice take their exit while the masquerades follow in terms of father mother, and son.

It is pertinent to note that the Obo is also the choric leader or master singer for the festival. After the afternoon performance, there is an interlude. At this point, men who wore the mask in their youth come out to dance, showing off their dancing skills and mimicking how they used to do it. The intervals also serve as a break period in which visitors and guests exchange pleasantries and refreshments.

In the evening, another story is dramatized. It is about wicked villagers and their inhuman treatment of an old man. This play begins with the entrance of an old man who goes to the elders of a village begging them to allow him to fell a tree, which is very close to the community so that he can use it to carve a canoe for his fishing occupation. The elders refuse to inform the stranger that 'Okuyaye', the dreaded fairy, lives on the said tree. They accept money, drinks, and customary kola nuts from the old man before permitting him to go ahead to fall the tree. On the first attempt, the fairy 'Okuyaye' brutalizes him. He reports the encounter with Okuyaye to

the elders who dismiss his story and ask him to go ahead to fell the tree. On his second and third attempts, the same thing happens to him. Frustrated, he goes back to the elders, asking for a refund of his money but the elders refuse him and drive him away. He leaves dejected but not without placing a curse on the village. The old man's curse becomes effective later when Okuyaye becomes uncontrollable, flogging and chasing the village's women on their way to the farm. As the village becomes unsafe for them, they abandon the village to look for a new settlement. The entire three-act play is presented amid dialogue with songs accompanied by the music produced by traditional drums.

Discussion

Plot: The plot of the Edegborode festival is disjointed and not in a linear format, the story that forms the plot of the festival performances is focused on the life experiences of the Edegboroded people. In the presentation of these life experiences, the story does not unfold in a linear progression but is infused with other stories and actions that seem unrelated. The stories and actions are effectively incorporated to achieve the desired dramatic effect. The plot structure in the Edegborode annual festival falls within the category described by Anigala (2006: 29). The stories that have been told in the festival are three. The struggle between the Agbakara and the Oloda, the display of the potency of traditional medicine, and the legendary story surrounding an old man, the Okuyaye' tree, and the villagers. Although the stories presented are different, the story plot structure rightly falls into the Eurocentric definition of drama as having a beginning middle, and end (logos, prologos, and denouement) (Wilson, 2004: 305). The beginning act which takes place in the morning is the introductory act. The middle act takes place in the afternoon while the third act which takes place in the evening is the concluding act or the denouncement. Like in the early Grecian festival in Athens, where the attic trilogies were presented, the interlude between each act of the festival is taken as recreation and refreshment in which visitors make friends and are entertained while the actors change into new costumes in preparation for the next act. At the end of every act of the performance, there is room for the actors to change into new costumes, especially after the afternoon act. The interlude which proceeds the last act also serves as a break period in which visitors and guests exchange pleasantries and refreshments. The festival story or plot also

has a conflict which is the internal or external struggle between opposing forces, ideas, or interests. This conflict in the plot creates dramatic tension or suspense. The audience felt a feeling of uncertainty as to the outcome. This conflict further builds interest and excitement on the part of the festival audience.

Themes: Parental responsibility in providing for the family, territorial ownership, and the struggle for survival and power is dramatized by the Oloda and the Agbakara in Act One. The Oloda who manages to escape from the grip of the Agbakara with his family indicates that survival and territorial possession is for the strong and powerful.

The religious belief of the people is narrated in the action of the Obo who asked for blessing and protection, first, from the gods and then, from the ancestors before the performance begins and for the overall success of the performance.

The festival performance also feature the use of medicinal plants as a fundamental component of the African traditional healthcare system. The Obo's physical performance on the top of the bottle without sustaining injury leaves the audience in awe. Following the display of this medical prowess, the audience is moved to buy traditional herbs from the community at the end of the performance. The Obo who displayed this prowess in the Edegborode festival performance symbolically represents the many traditional medicine men and women in Africa whose knowledge of the use of traditional herbs and plants to treat infectious and chronic conditions is unmeasurable.

The implication of lies and corruption is exemplified in the dramatization of the old man who goes to the elders of the village to seek permission to fall a tree he can use to carve a fishing boat for his fishing occupation. The community elders accepted money, drinks, and customary kola nuts from the old man and granted him permission to go ahead and fall the tree without letting him know the truth about the Okuyaye tree, and the elder's refusal to refund the stranger's money shows deceitfulness. The old man's curse on the land and Okuyaye's uncontrolled flogging and chasing of the women in the community from their farms, leading to the entire community abandoning their original settlement presents the negative implication of deceit and lies.

Characters: Further, the performance has individual characters with distinctive traits. The characters are both humans and spirits. The character's imitative ability especially those imitating the spirits convinces the audience that a larger-than-life character has been presented. The characters imitate the actions of others which they do not perform in real life. The masquerades in the Edegborode Annual Festival performance as dramatic characters, imitated or impersonated others. Presumably 'pretending' to be spirits was the very heart of the dramatic mystery. The festival's character realisation falls within the scope of Anigala and Adelugba assertion. They said that the characters needed the element of possession in traditional festival performances. Clarks calls the element of possession a state of transformation. Anigala further explains the state of transformation to be: The personality exchange that takes place during the performance. Thus, the performer loses every trace of his original self and is completely enveloped in his new role where he is lost to the world around him but is conscious of the rules of the game (Clark, 1981: 123, Anigala, 2006, 32). This perfectly fits the characters in the Edegborode festival performance.

Further, the two water creatures, the Agbakara and Oloda were suggestive symbols of the gods that inhabited the water which nurtured the main occupation of the Edegborode people. Another spirit is Okuyaye. Except for the Okuyaye, the spirit beings are represented by different masquerades with their children. Masqueraders of the performance are specifically selected because of their strength to mimic the spirit creatures they represented. The Agbakara seemed to have more strength. Other human characters were also present in the performance. Characters like Obo (usually the oldest man in the community. If he is not physically fit at the time of the performance, someone else preferably the community chief priest plays the role), and his apprentice, usually a young boy, and the stranger, an aged man of about 56 years. Various elders and community people are also included among the characters. The characters in the festival are a typical representation of the people of Edegborode community and their occupation which is fishing and farming. While waters (Rivers and Streams) for fishing are limited in the community, causing the struggle for occupancy, they have vast farmlands and forest trees they put into lease.

The Costumes: The costumes used in the performance are elaborate. The masquerades carry head masks that are the totem of the god or gods they represent. These totems are highly conventionalised and are easily

recognised by members of the audience. Since most of the masquerades are believed to have come from the water, beauty is the bone of their attribute. The masquerades costumes are made of light cotton or silk material with another heavier, velveteen, properly tucked in from the waist down to the knee. Their legs are painted white which connotes invisibility with traditional “Akwa” tied to the legs to produce a jingling sound as the masquerades move about. To be able to distinguish masquerades in terms of the father, mother, and child, colour is properly manipulated. The males are costumed in grey, connoting old age; the females are costumed in green which connotes fertility, while the child is costumed in yellow which connotes youthfulness.

Music and Dance: Music and dance are also major elements in the annual festival performance. Women, girls, and youth of the community make up the choric force and they are an integral part of the performance. These improve the communication level of the performance and are a major source of entertainment for the audience. Dances usually follow swiftly at the raise of a song. Thus, by the use of their body, dance reproduces the passions and actions of the people and expresses their collective emotion to teach a religious rite and to entertain the audience. The music and dances fostered the enactment of the legendary Okuyaye story. Most of the songs, besides, serving as entertainment and enjoyment for the audience, elevate the spiritual strength of the performer into performing extraordinarily. It is a medium for transporting the performer through his thought to another world where he meets face to face with higher beings. At the high point of the masquerade dance, the drummers dare not miss the rhythm of the drum, or else, he receives strokes of the cane by the dancing masquerade. From the very first act to the last there is the presence of music and dance. This entertains and enables members of the audience to appreciate the performance. The first music that introduces the performance reminds the audience of the need to be generous and that abundant blessings including wealth and children await the generous ones. The second music helps the audience to appreciate traditional medicine, to trust in it, and to use it for protection and cure. Thus, the music, songs, and dances were significant in the festival performance. Also, a set of drums was used to produce music during the festival. They included: Agba, Izui-Igede (mother drum), Omi-Igede (child drum or possibly minor drum), Abese, and Ekpe. All the dance movements and the gestures in the performance are dedicated to the Odje-

Igede. A good display of dancing skill is crowned with the women cheering “I-----Iye”.

Performance Arena: The performance arena is a prominent aspect contributing to the success of the performance. There is no raised stage on which the festival performance takes place. Both actors and the audience remain on the same plane. The performance starts from the Efi and moves down to the main performance ground. A semi-circle is formed with the drummers completing the circle. The circle-like arena has an opening (at least two) in between the audience where performers go in and out of the arena. However, as the performer moves, the audience moves, and so also the arena. No seats are provided, but individuals are allowed to bring seats for themselves from their various houses. However, the elders are placed close to the drummers and a canopy is raised to cover them from the heat of the December sun.

The Audience(s): Prominently is the Edegborode Festival audience an active participative audience. Every member of the audience gives the actors support by clapping their hands in appreciation for the complete actualization of the performance. Some members of the audience participate by joining in the choral songs and dancing when the performance moves them. There are also passive audience members who stop only at the level of imaginative participation. There are also the critical members of the audience who have watched several groups perform at various times. This set of audience compares the ongoing performance with past performances they have watched. While some keep their judgment to themselves, others share theirs. This is in harmony with Amankulor quoted in Anigala (2006: 27) that the audience is so central to traditional performances that without them so much time would not be spent by communities in the artistic preparation phase of the festivals.

Conclusion

My ethnographic study of the Edegborode festival performance reveals that African theatre (performance) is the combination of the dual elements of celebration and participation involving the coming together of many aspects of the theatre such as music, poetry, dance, acting, miming, masking as well as singing. It is therefore evident from what I have discussed in this paper that the content and conflict dramatized in the Edegborode festival are apt, rich, and varied in content. The discussion also shows that Eurocentric dramatic elements and conventions abound in the performance. Also, all Folkism laws, that of opening, joint performance, creativity, free enactment, and responsibility, judgment, protest against suspense, expression of emotions, ego projection, and the law of closing are present in the Edegborode festival performance. It is therefore possible to develop this festival drama into a more dramatic folk play using Folkism aesthetics forms.

One major setback the Edegborode Festival performance suffers is poor recognition. Prominent individuals, the government, and international and local media outlets have taken little or no interest in the festival as much as they do with the Akata Benue Fishing Festival, the Eyo Festival, Argungun Fishing Festival, Calabar Carnival, and the New Yam Festival of the Igbo people of Nigeria. The Okpe people, like the Calabar's, Ibo's Yoruba's, and the Hausa's will have a dual advantage of gaining international recognition for their culture while still carrying out the traditional performances and popularising it through the media.

While this study posit that traditional festival performances could be recreated into modern folk drama, there is paucity of discourses on eco-protection and the potency of traditional medicine in African traditional festivals. I recommend that scholars especially those interested in African studies look in this direction.

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