

The Artistic and Dramatic Values of the Okposo Festival of the Itsekiri People of Ugbuwangue

MATILDA EYTUOYO OVIE-JACK

Delta State School of Marine Technology, Burutu, Delta State, Nigeria

Abstract. The Okposo festival of the Itsekiri people of Ugbuwangue is highly spiritual. It recreates in dramatic and poetic mode the people's closeness to the marine (Okun) ecology of the Niger Delta. Its yearly enactment has served in recent years as not only a means of cultural unification but also a platform family renewal. The festival has as part of its aesthetic realization, the complete elements of modern theatre such as dance, song, ritual, costume, chants, and imitation. This paper thus examines the cultural values and dramatic aesthetics that constitute the performance of the Okposo festival of the Itsekiri people of Ugbuwangue in a bid to highlight the elements of drama and its modes of cultural redefinition in contemporary societies. The paper adopts the participant observation method as the theoretical framework to enable us obtain adequate information from the society and interpret same with regards to the metaphor of traditional theatre and ritual efficacy of African festivals. The paper concludes that African festival not only serves as a means of entertainment but also as a mode of preserving the cherished cultural values of the people.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Festival, Itsekiri, Okposo.

1. Introduction

Around Africa before the arrival of colonial masters, the continent was teeming with performance activities in form of ceremonies, festival, religious rites, storytelling and various forms of celebrations, all interwoven into the diverse African culture (Brocketts 568). The African is a very superstitious, expressive and religious person, who believes in the involvement of the gods in the daily experience of the people, hence the controlling impulse to appease the gods. It is an inborn belief system that guides his path

through life and destiny, believing in the existence of the gods that they control every aspect of man's life and existence. Iyeh and Aluede attribute their voices to this fact saying;

Religion permeates deeply into the fabric of the African's earthly life is expressed in all facets of their life and endeavors. Africans are religious people who go everywhere with their religion, hence they are always in touch with their God. Africans communicate individually and collectively with their God, and this accounts for why rituals and ceremonies are observed both individually and collectively. When such ceremonies and rituals are observed collectively by a people at a set time of the year, it is called a festival (86).

From the foregoing, it is obvious that festivals grew out of utilitarian purpose of the African in line with subconscious drive to communicate and collaborate with the supernatural world, with an attempt to appease and soothe the gods saw the emergence of diverse kinds of festival. As a celebration of life is an integral part of African existence. The word "Festivus" means a feast, joyous or mirthful. Festival is the commemoration of gods, spirits, ancestors, kings or historical events. Bame (72) describes African festival as;

Seasonal.... Propitiatory, sacrificial and laudatory ceremonies by means of which African ethnic groups acknowledged the blessings of the supreme creator and the lesser deities and ancestral spirits manifest in good health, good harvest and abundance of children.

Public performances in a medium of expression and communication in indigenous African cultures. African festivals are as old as the people; examples are Okere Juju festival (Umale Okere) of Okere in Warri, Egungun festival, New Yam festival,

Olorogun festival of Ayakoromo, Ekine festival of Calabari and lots more. Most festivals are myth based, carnival, ritual dances and drama. Oyin Ogumba (4) defines festival as “an indigenous cultural institution, a form of art nurtured of the African soil over the centuries which has features and whose technique are sometimes totally different from the borrowed forms now practiced by many of our contemporary artist” he further observes that:

Traditional festivals are staged from time to time.

In a town

Of modest size, say twenty thousand habitants, there may

Be as many as ten to fifteen festivals in a year’s cycle of Ceremonies.

Such ceremonies are woven around diverse

Beings and physical phenomena

ranging from powerful

gods and goddesses to hills and

water spirit and generality

of illustrious ancestors (Ogumba 3).

Geoffery Gorer attests in his book titled *Africa Dances*, published 1935 that; the customs of Africa people is rapidly fading under the advancing attack of European civilization. This is 2018, how much do Africans and the Itsekiris in particular have to show, hence the urgent need to preserve and document.

The Okposo festival is a festival of the Ugbuwague people of Warri-South, in Delta state, that women children and non-initiates can partake in. It holds every ten years during the festive season for seven days, because it is particularly special and honorable. Every masquerade performs, in Itsekiri it is called ‘Lu ekun tan’ It is a cultural based occasion bringing Itsekiris from all walks of life and non Itsekiris together. During the celebration there is renewal of bond with ancestors and the gods, vows fulfilled and renewed for protection and provision, and pledges made by suffering injustice. The language used is Itsekiri because language is the core of cultural liability.

This paper looks at the religious and social elements and would enable Itsekiris and non- Itsekiris, at a glance to know the origin, preparation, costume and performance as it concerns the Okposo festival.

1.1 Historical Background

The Ugbuwague community was founded by Prince Iyonwuren (Yonwuren) and his sister Princess Agbenje (Agbeje), both children of the late King Akengbuwa 1, the 16th Olu of Warri, after they left their elder brother Prince Oritsemone in Usele. Prince

Yonwuren and his elder sister established Ugbuwague town, which is on the mainland of Warri. Masquerades are very important to the Ugbuwague people, when a family or community have a special guest of high admiration, masquerades are used for entertainment.

In the past some gods come in form of birds, strange objects in the river, while some trouble residents at night or destroy their fishing nets until the oracle is consulted. The Okposo is a goddess that existed before Prince Yonwuren and Princess Agbeje migrated to the present day Ugbuwague. This is same with Oginaga of Usele that existed before Prince Oritsemone elder brother to Prince Yonwuren and Princess Agbeje moved to Usele. In other Itsekiri communities the umales are invited by umales already existing in the land or by those who migrated. This is a proof that umale exists in the Itsekiri cosmology. The Itsekiris of Ugbuwague like other Itsekiri community maintain a cotton relationship with the marine for provision and protection in return for sacrifice and celebration of the gods and deities.

After years of dwelling in the land, the people of Ugbuwague started experiencing strange occurrences that forced them to consult the oracle. It was discovered that there is a goddess living in the land called Okposo. The goddess says the people occupying the land did not recognize her presence nor honor her. The people pledged their allegiance to the goddess, which was the beginning of the Umale Okposo festival. Initially it was celebrated every thirty years because it is a masquerade of honour and very high esteem, It was reduced to fifteen years, presently it is ten years, make the people familiar with the ritual process and performance.

1.2 Glossary of Itsekiri Terms

Eteshe	Headdress
Ebura	Ancestor
Agbakara	Crocodile
Ilele egbele	Feather
Imerigo	Fresh palm frond
Ude	Rattles
Uda	Cutlass
Okwa	Lead drummer
Okposo	Goddess
Okposo	Old women above
seventy years	
Oritsenbubuwe	Almighty God
Umale-Okun	Sea-god
Okparan-Umale	Chief Priest
Uleghe	Elegance
Ugba	Calabash/Gourd

2. Preparatory Ceremony for the Okposo Festival

The Okposo festival a decennial festival of the Ugbuwangue people holds during the festive period in December. The Okposo is a water-goddess that has power to influence commerce, fertility and maintenance of moral order. In the course of preparation series of rituals for public and private participation takes place, to cleanse the land, appease deities, ancestors, gods and invitation of the masquerades from the Umaleokun kingdom because they don't dwell with men. The opkaran umale (Chief priest) is the one that coordinates all ceremonies and talks to the gods on behalf of the people. The ceremony for public participation are takes place at the altars of all deities in the, village square and front of the shrine. While that of private participation happens in the big shrine and very late in the night by the initiated and Ojo- Orun (night masquerade). Preparation for the Okposo festival starts at the beginning of the year with 'Awerewere', which has to do with the cleansing of the land by chasing out evil spirits from the community.

The iwe aware (aware leaves), same as that used for Igue festival in the Benin kingdom is used for this ceremony. On the day of the awerewere, at about 4:00am before the cock crows, one of the women raises one of the aware songs to wake all sons and daughters in the community informing them that they are about to invite happiness into the community. Each one rises to hold a wood with fire, the fire symbolizes the exit of darkness as a result of the light they are holding. With the firewood in hand they pray to the gods and shout "Ubi re!" (ill-luck /evil go away). The tide also plays a prominent role like it does in the "Mu ikpa ri eri". Everyone throws their wood into the river for the tide to take away, meaning the tide has taken away all evil from the land. Participants come together for the eldest man or his representative to bless, while palm wine, kolanut and local gin is served. Thereafter, songs will be sung to praise Oritsenebruwe (the almighty God) and the eburu (ancestors) of the land. By 6:00am they start dancing visiting almost all household to drop the aware leaves, with a menopausal woman or a young virgin carrying a calabash on her head. The contents of the calabash are white kaolin chalk and kolanut. Their host can decide to put money inside the calabash or entertain them with drinks. The awerewere dance round the community is to bring in peace, comfort, joy and prosperity.

Few months later the 'Mu Ikpa ri eri' (appeasing gods of the river) ceremony is carried out. This ceremony is to appease and send food to the gods of the river. Mu ikpa ri eri highly depends on the tide, if its wrongly calculated then the ritual cannot be carried out. It has to do with individuals bringing food stuff and canned food to the village square, when the tide time clicks. A small broken canoe is brought out for all to put their food inside by those in attendance. A baby goat is slaughtered inside the canoe, the okparan umale (chief priest) drops his own food first, the Iyeloma (mother of all the masquerades) drops hers before other people in attendance will drop theirs in the canoe. For this ceremony three Hippi from the Okiribowe (big shrine) are present. With everyone circled around the canoe, the Hippi goes round to purify them. Immediately after that the first Hippi with few initiated, takes the small canoe with food into a bigger canoe to deliver the food to the gods of the river. The second Hippi runs round the community to cleanse the town and fortify the awerewere ceremony. While the third Hippi takes banga, fufu and other sacrificial food to the entrance of the community to appease the gods residing there and gods who pass through the highway.

Every first Sunday of August there is another masquerade dance called 'Umale-awaran'. Awaran means weather condition, example is the August break. All these are annual procedural rituals to appease the big goddess Okposo because her celebration is not annual. The ritual continues daily while the festival is ongoing to the end. Deities in Ugbuwangue are Okribowe, Ukpejuku and Eebi. Okribowe is the deity in the big shrine, Ukpejuku is the minister of defense, god of war also called Agbakara (crocodile), that fights against enemies of the community whenever there is a war. Ukpejuku accepts only ram and fowl as sacrifice. The last is Eebi, that accepts only roasted food like yam and chicken. The chicken for appeasing eebi is roasted with the feather. Eebi makes available a good weather for the masquerade and other events in the community. Other ritual takes place at night when women and uninitiated are asleep. The festival is accompanied by huge celebrations

3. Dramatic Content of the Okposo Festival

For this festival the emphasis is on the costume. The festival exhibits different kinds of masquerades using both human and animal motifs. The feet of all the masquerades are red showing the red nature of the palace and throne of the god of the sea (Umaleokun), like the feet of the Egyptian Hippi showing the color

of the Nile soil. In Ugbuwangue the Hippi though a male god has female attributes; glamorous female head-tie, vibrating buttocks and other head decoration. Fresh palm frond is also common with all masquerades except the Ode, Oyobo, Ole and Agbo Ode.

Mask forms a part of the costume and it symbolizes the supernatural. The masks are usually a part of the costume that adorns the whole body. There are three types of African mask namely; the face mask, helmet mask and the headdress. The Okposo and other masquerades use the headdress, called Eteshe in Itsekiri language. The eteshe, which is the most symbolic of African artistic representation looks like a carved wood which serves as a means of communication between the gods, spirits and man. It also means head, depends on the usage. There is the representation of human, animals, deities and fishes through the use of the headdress. Masks are:

Carved in the likeness of spirits, animals, human beings
and other strange characters
found in the environment.

Masks in most traditional societies are used to represent the spirits or ancestors. Thus the masquerades explains
the entrance of the spirit actor (Clive 27).

The dance masquerades are distinguished by their eteshe. The eteshe of Okposo is expansive, that of the man has the face of the man that of the woman has the face of the, with lots of colorful feather. The feather symbolizes motherhood, just as the mother hen shields her chicks from danger and cold. Feather is called lelegbele in Itsekiri. Feather deals with ascension and spiritual evolution to a higher plane. As a symbol across many cultures, feathers represent a connection to divinity. Eteshe of Ogoni is Agbakara (crocodile) representing one of the deities of Ugbuwangue community, Igodo eteshe looks like the head of a goat, Udugbo is like man while Adumu is human head with hair like a mermaid. Udele and Oki have fish as their eteshe, the former also called Ugbode and smallest of all masquerades has the hammer head shark, and the latter, which is the smartest and most active of them all has the sword shark. Tikoro with a cutlass is violent like the Igwe is made of all eteshe. Olisha's eteshe is very unique like rainbow trees or colorful long spoke of an umbrella. The eteshe of the Igwe, the commander general is red, symbolizing danger. Igwe is always holding a big cutlass ready to destroy, but he restricted by the rope tied around his waist and respects only Okposo. The rope is held by the strongest amongst the

initiated. Oyobo, a servant to Okposo is covered with plantain leaf symbolizing his ordinariness, with no eteshe. Ole covered with wrapper does not hail imerigo or ude, instead fresh coconut fronds around his ankles like Umale Okere, holding a stick with imerigo tied around it. Whenever ole steals anything he quickly dips the stick inside so that women and the uninitiated won't be able to retrieve from him.

The masquerade costumes are elaborate with faces covered with wrapper. All masquerades except Ole, Agbode and Oyobo have the big (oma in Itsekiri) and small bells around their waist and rattles (ude) around their ankles, thus making their presence known.

Relating to the elements of performance of oral literature, the masquerade takes the place of the oral artist. This is because like the oral artist he engages in a certain atmosphere that puts it in a special light and indeed encourages a certain atmosphere of confrontation between him and his audience. The performance takes place in the village square called "ogwa baba" where they seclude a part for masquerades to perform. The most significant class of dramatic class of dramatic material is what has been referred to as masquerade performances of mask dances. It is a performance of very rich treat. The secluded space which can also be called the acting place is a ritual and sacred space that women and uninitiated cannot go to until the masquerade leaves the arena. Also when the masquerades are seated, take a break to the mini shrine or go round the community to greet the ancestors and deities, the dancers take the stage. The dancers are all dressed in beautiful attires, men and women opposite with a big space between them. There is interplay of all elements of performance; space, time, action and audience.

Songs and musical instruments play a very important role in the Okposo performance, without which performance cannot be achieved. Both help to generate and sustain a desired level of physical upliftment for the masquerades and dancers. It is important to note that the African oral performance does not distinguish the audience from the performer. The recognition of the audience is an alliance with the community where the performance took place.

The audience in a truly traditional setting of oral performance is a force to be reckoned with.... there is no physical separation between performer and audience members. The artist is practically surrounded by them and in some cases moves through the midst in

the course of the performance (Okpewho 65).

The audience in most cases is participants that are used to the masquerades performance. They sometimes interpret, applaud or criticize the masquerade dancing. Hence the masquerade on stage must in an artful manner dance to the delight of the audience.

The seven days festival has a timetable, with three outings daily; morning, afternoon and evening. This excludes the Agbode, Ole and Oyobo. During the break men, women, boys and girls form groups and dance round going from house to house for financial benefit and entertainment. This dance is called 'Ukpukpe' which means war dance.

Day One:

Every morning the wives and mother of the masquerade wait in front of the shrine dressed in white. The first masquerade to appear aside the domestic masquerades; Ole and Agbode is 'Ogheye'. The Ogheye does not dance but, comes to inform people of Ugbuwangue community the mother of all masquerades, Okposo will be performing on the second and also does a critical supervision to know if all arrangements are in place, warns evil doers in the community to abstain from evil, prophecies, by telling what is to happen and points out wherever evil things take place happen in the community so it could be cleansed. Offenders are taken to the Ogheye and he does well to punish them.

Day Two:

On the second day it is only the Okposo that performs, while the Ogheye goes around prophesying and administering justice. The Okposo comes out with her husband and son Ode, at about midday, goes through the ancestral route to greet the ancestors and all deities of the land, returns back to the village square, dances a little and departs. It is a masquerade of huge element of pageantry display that does not walk on bare ground like others but on expensive damask wrapper. Okposo is the only masquerade that walks elegantly and dances slowly. Ode means hunter, this kind of hunter does not hunt animals but hunts women at the arena. It is different from other masquerades because it does not have the sacred umerigo around its body, making it possible for women touch it. The Ode never comes out with other Ode but with his mother and father. Ode is always in the middle receiving protection from his parents, also has a younger brother that comes out with Olisha and his wife.

Day Three:

On the morning of the third day is Ogoni, afternoon is Agbakara and Uleghe. From the third day all

masquerades come out in three, all the same with the best dancer in the middle.

Day Four:

Agrija performs in the morning, with dance steps like that of Ishan masquerade of Edo State. In the afternoon there is Udele also called Ugbo also the smallest of all masquerades. The last for the day is Oki, which is the smartest and most active of all masquerades

Day Five:

On the fifth day it gets more interesting with Igodo in the morning, Udugbo in the afternoon Olisha in the evening.

Day Six:

The sixth day is known as 'oko gun oko gua' which simply means boats coming and going. On this day there is a repetition of all that masquerades that performed from the third day to the fifth day. It is like a carnival for the masquerades.

Day Seven:

A special ritual takes place before comes out, it is carried out by old women above seventy. They are also called Okposo because of their age. They will be in front of the shrine with each holding old trays and cane to hit the tray. Their duty is to sing nine traditional songs before the Okposo comes out of the shrine, and then escort the Okposo to the arena. The seventh day is the grand finale, and the last day of the last outing, the Ode comes out of the shrine three times to announcing the coming of the big masquerade called Okposo with her husband "Urun ebobo wa ren" "Something wonderful is coming". It makes a strange noise that is a mixture of vocal sound with rhythm. He is a woman's masquerade that makes women happy and very friendly with beautiful voice. The Ode, like the Ole is a bundle of humor. When the Okposo is performing or takes its eyes off Ode, the Ode runs after women using the wood it is holding to poke their buttocks. He does this until the women would grab and take him into hiding. He is captured to test the strength of his mother Okposo. When the mother discovers the child is missing she gets violent and starts crying looking for her son Ode, very attentive at the same time to hear the Ode's voice. The Ode loves singing it is his voice that would make it easier for his parents to rescue him. The father is involved in the search too, but goes a separate way from the wife to search.

Ole: Ole means thief and lazy, he is a mischief maker, serves as a catalyst endowed with negative qualities, but has very high regard for the Okposo and Igwe. The Ole steals from men to feed others in the shrine. He does not come out of the shrine like others but sneaks out, to make it stealing easier. But whenever he is sighted by kids or women they scream Ole!!!! So others would be aware that the

stealing masquerade is out. Followed mostly by children singing and clapping for Ole to dance.

Agbo-Ode: Agbo-Ode means outside sweeper that sweeps the community. He starts from the shrine, town square, through the ancestral route and back to the shrine. It is a masquerade without a headdress, all it does is sweep.

Oyobo: this masquerade is a servant to the Okposo that takes upon himself all the curses, ill-luck and evil in the community. Oyobo is very powerful spiritual, but very lazy and likes sleeping.

After the dance festival ritual continues, for another seven days with the Hippi/Ipi. The Hippi is a water-god believed to be the senior child of the sea-god (Umaleokun), and a symbol of unity of all people of the kingdom. The Hippi is stubborn, quarrelsome, pursues his offenders to no end, protects and guards the throne of his father. In some communities like Okotomu-Irigbo of Ode-Itsekiri, the Hippi is usually the first masquerade to appear to keep the community in contact with the spirit of the sea-god, Umaleokun. But in Ugbuwangue the Hippi is always the last to appear, after the seven days of feasting. Apart from representing the Umaleokun the Hippi can also represent other water-gods in rituals like Mu Ikpa Ri Eri ritual, that has do with giving food to Umaleokun. The Hippi is the only god allowed to take the offerings of food, water, drink, kola, alligator pepper and kaolin (white chalk), no other god however big or small is allowed to do so. Boat Regattas are associated with the Umaleokun and so the Hippi is the masquerade that comes out during such. The Egyptian Nile-god also called Hippi is responsible for communal sanctification by driving out evil spirits like the Itsekiri Hippi. Whenever there is suicide by hanging, there is traditional ritual the Hippi performs at the place the suicide takes place.

The belief holds that the Okposo festival destroys bareness in the land, averts sickness and ill-luck, lastly, and ensures prosperity and protection. It is a feast that would be well cherished by tourists because it creates an avenue to display African art and modernize African tradition, towards a sustainable tourism development by showcasing the rich cultural heritage of the people. As a result of this study the festival will not fade into the oblivion

References

Agharowu, E., & Oritseweyinmi, O. (2008). *History of Warri in Cultural Perspective 3400B.C-1480A.D.* Lagos: Canal Paper Converters Limited.

- Ayomike, J. O. S., I. (2016, February 21). Centenary Commemoration of Prince Ogbe. Programme, 3–6.
- Clive, K. I. (2006). *African Traditional Theatre and Drama: Themes and Perspectives.* Port Harcourt: Akpokem International.
- Daniel, S. T. P. (2011). *The Okotomu-Irigbo People of Itsekiri.* Warri: Bestly Intl.Ventures.
- Daniel, O. (2013). Towards a Semiotics of the Literary Aesthetics of Itsekiri Drum Language. *Nigerian Journal of Oral Literatures*, 1 (1), 161–182.
- Felix, A. B. (2002). *Weaving the Tale: An Introduction to the Performance of Oral Literature.* Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited.
- Geoffery, G. (1945). *Africa Dances.* London: Penguin Books.
- Isidore, O. (1992). *Africa Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Continuity and Creativity.* Ibadan: University Press.
- Kofi, A. (1975). *Breast of the Earth.* New York: Nok Publishers International.
- Mac, O. E. (2008). *Mofe's Dictionary in Itsekiri : Iwe Umofu.* Benin City: Mofe Press.