

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

A Study of Aquatic Audience in Masquerade Festival Performance

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Abstract:

The focus of this study is set on aquatic audience which is a new terminology in the corpus of African theatre. The term has not come as subject under academic discourse. No scholarly work has accorded to it the required attention in the past. This could be because the literature on the Ijo theatrical performances is still new and scanty. In view of the rising interest in aquatic theatre in the Niger Delta, a study of aquatic audiences which is a subsidiary of the aquatic theatre genre is both important and urgent. The existence of the aquatic audience as a form of audience within the African masquerade tradition is not in dispute. It is an authentic audience type which is embodied with a potent energy to propel a performance into hysterical climax. With the help of the author's previous participation and observation of festivals in the Ijo speaking part of Nigeria, the study is undertaken to survey the aquatic audience to establish the radical functionalities inherent in it. Besides the participation observation method, the study also applied itself to the literary methodology to further articulate the facts about it. One fact that crystallizes is that there are two divisions of aquatic audiences. The division is along natural and supernatural lines. There is one that is classified as a spirit audience and another that is considered as a canoe audience. Ultimately, the aquatic audience is discovered to be a product of the environment and the culture of the people. From the above findings, the study recommends that further study should be carried out to understand the aquatic audience behaviour. Another way to find it useful is by viewing it as a potential tourist attraction. Finally, this work would open the eyes of theatre scholars to new research grounds in the field of performance studies.

Keywords: Aquatic audience, festival, Ijo and masquerade

1. Introduction

Theatre, dating from its documented past, has no record of departing in anyway from its public utility. The service to the public is held with conservative firmness as its basic function. Theatre owes an essential duty to entertain and educate the public on themes of social, religious, cultural, political and, in some cases, economic value. It loses its basic identity and true essence of being a public art when it no longer can entertain and educate or when there is no audience to entertain and educate. Austine Anigala (2005) echoes that, '... without an audience there can be no theatre - especially festival theatres which thrive on the spectator support given to it. The survival and success of traditional displays depend on the reaction of the audience - that element of communal sharing and identity that give the performance a significant form' (p. 26).

Ancient religious ceremonies which were organised as homage to Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and fertility, were performances partly for the pleasure of a wide variety of spectators. Greek theatre is said to derive from the root of such traditions where performances were institutionalised for religious and entertainment purposes. In terms of purpose and function, theatre in Africa manifests no distant difference from Greek theatre. African traditional conception of theatre, quite identical to the Greek, is a type of public art which is intended to accommodate every member of the society who is willing to share in festivity. Here, it means, audience members participate freely in performances they attend, with no special rules and cultural restrictions to unduly regulate the kind and degree of participation in the performance. In the traditional setting, especially in communal festivals, even the man in the street is liable to have a participant's knowledge of what activity is to come at each stage of the performance because, in some way, he is qualified to take part in the performance. The audiences, from the time of ancient Greek ritual performances, gather with individual expectations, a variety of levels of knowledge about the production, and a variety of personal tastes. The audience is one of the two essential features of a live theatrical performance. It is next only to the performer in importance.

African theatre thrives on total community participation. It can only flourish with a panoply of all its different art forms when there is an audience's presence. Traditional theatre performers are in full awareness of the value of the audience as collaborators. They are conscious of audience reactions which may indicate approval or disapproval of individual display of talent. A performance may vary greatly from one day to the next dependent, in large part, on audience feedback. The interest of the spectator may be in the aesthetic qualities of the Performance; however, a greater interest could be in assessing the quality of the talent and how a performer deploys it with finesse for entertainment.

2. Masquerade Festival in Ijo

In Ijo land, a number of festivities and cultural performances are held yearly to express the cultural heritage and the shared feelings of the individuals of a community. Krama Ilami (2013) presents the festival as, 'formalized or unformalized rituals that aid the cultural expression of a people in any attempt to maintain a balanced environment' (p. 32). In traditional Ijo society, festivals are regular features which are organised around nature forces, deities, divinities, supernatural events, myths and legends. There are numerous types of festivals. However, the primary interest of the present paper is in masquerade festivals which lie within the broad category of traditional festivals. Hagher (1990) posits that traditional festival is, 'an indigenous cultural institution, an art form nurtured on the African soils with distinct features and a framework for coordinating virtually all art forms of the community'(p. 59). Traditional festival is a live presentation by performers who are sometimes clad in masks and colorful costumes. Mask is an indispensable artistic device of masquerade festivals usually worn on the face or head, together with a costume covering all or part of the rest of the body (Brisibe, 2012). A performer assumes the identity of a masquerade the moment he is mounted with a mask and the accompanying costumes.

Masquerade, according to Ted Ayenbe (2011), is conceived as 'an artistic expression of tradition, a cultural idiom of the people's living systems' (p. 51). Masquerade as a term, within the Ijo worldview, expresses a cultural understanding that enunciates the physical re-enactments of their socio-spiritual life. As seen from this perspective, masquerade is a transcendental artistic medium whose presentations express the Ijo cosmological ideology and their view of the interrelatedness between the natural and the supernatural, the spiritual and the secular, the mundane and the metaphysical. It is not merely face covering in ritual and theatre, or disguise meant to hide the identity of the wearer (Ayenbe, p. 51). The Ijo view of masquerade which brings religion and entertainment into a point of convergence lends valuable credentials to the masquerade form in the theatrical space. The masquerade tradition in Ijo provides a physical as well as symbolic separation between the form in motion and the audience/participants. The accomplishment of this comes when the usual theatrical atmosphere is created where the audience suspends awareness of the real world, and accepts in its place, the world of the theatre. Therefore, in Ijo, masquerade is that physical contraption which is the personification of spirits, representing images of water gods and goddesses.

3. Audience in Masquerade Festival

An audience in a masquerade festival in Ijo land consists of the water spirits who are represented in the head-pieces of the masquerades and the people who gather in their canoes on the body of water, following the masquerade from upstream to downstream. It also includes those who participate in one activity or another onshore. It is dynamic and clearly different from the Western idea of an audience where people simply gather together and sit within a confined space to watch an art performance. The masquerade audience is ubiquitous, it occurs at the village square, the market square, the forest, the river, the shrine or any such location the masquerade may be constrained to perform one function or another.

In his discussion of audience in African traditional theatre, krama (2013) identified three types of audience: the nominal audience, the participative audience and the spirit audience. The nominal audience refers to the onlookers who have no serious interest in the performance therefore refuse to play any significant role. Some of the characters in this category are individuals with little or no cultural background. In the village setting, those with anti-festival attitudes are majorly Christians of the Pentecostal religious sects. In the case of the participative audience, Krama argues that the audience doubles as performers. He participates in the emotion and flows with the performance. The significance of this audience is the fact that it characterizes participation as the identity of African audience. The third type of audience which is a reference to spirit beings in attendance of a performance borders on the uniqueness and the complex nature of the African geo-cultural universe. In addition to these three types, a fourth type was introduced. Abraye (2017), with specific reference to the aquatic theatre in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, introduced into the literature what he called the hyphenate(d) audience. The hyphenate audience is described so, 'because the audience is only joined together by the performance of the float as it moves from one community to another therefore creating chain audience that is only linked by the experience of the aquatic performance that they had all experienced or watched'(p. 11).

This classification clearly explains how African audiences are flexible, dynamic, collaborative and participatory in nature. It is not regimented and strictly formalized like is known about some non-African theatre audiences. In several ways, the African indigenous audience is distinct in character from what is seen to obtain in theatrical performances of many countries in the world. The audience in masquerade festival is purely a performing audience who participates at every stage of the performance. Actions such as dancing, singing, drumming, clapping, ululating, and so on are executed with profound passion and commitment by the audience to give additional color to the overall spectacle. Some of the most enthusiastic groups are those watching from the water. They are the aquatic audience which is the subject of this paper. Aquatic audience, although not listed by either Krama or Abraye, is a common, efficacious and visible type of audience in Ijo masquerade festivals.

4. The Aquatic Audience

The Ijo man takes advantage of the river and puts it into effective use by converting canoes and other moveable platforms into natural auditoriums during festivals. Anderson (2009) notes that, 'the Ijo even have an equivalent of a drive-in-theatre, for they sometimes watch masquerades from canoes' (p. 155). There is no masquerade festival in the riverine Ijo area of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria without the water being covered by a myriad of viewers. The canoes

used provide them with the necessary opportunity to have a comprehensive view of the performance. Watching from those moveable platforms, the spectators enjoy an unobstructed and wide view of the performance in all directions. By following the masquerade as it moves from place to place, the audience is afforded the right position to make clear and informed assessment of the dances, music, and all other performative activities of the day.

No restriction of any form is constructed to inhibit a person from becoming part of the aquatic audience. For example, an able-bodied man who wishes to avoid the rigours of running and dancing onshore is at absolute liberty to resort to joining in the aquatic audience. It does not mean lack of interest on the part of the viewer. The aquatic auditorium is probably the best place for researchers who intend to undertake closer study of the festival because of the convenience provided by the space. One group that is usually spotted in the midst of the sea of spectators is those going on a journey to their respective villages in commercial outboard engine boats. The river is the only available means of transportation; therefore, travelers are a common sight during the season of festival. On days the displays are found enthralling, the passengers stay till nightfall without giving any thought to the darkness approaching. They must remain and watch it to its full end. Different reasons account for why the aquatic auditorium is preferred. The fear of the dreadful appearance of masquerades is a reason. The audience composition is not limited by class, gender or age. The only persons who may not be courageous enough to enlist in the aquatic audienceship are those who cannot swim or who have phobia for water. The ones without swimming skills who desire to watch the show from the canoe can resort to life safety jackets for protection. Generally, women, little children, and visitors (local tourists) are the categories of people who most frequently constitute the aquatic audience. Abraye (2017) supports this position and asserts that '...about 80% of the audience is women. The remaining 20% is made up of say 15% children and 5% men' (p. 6).

In its strict sense, aquatic audience refers to the group of people who view a performance from one position or another on or in the water. This is a largely participative audience which is inspired by masquerade performance. On a second level, the aquatic audience is composed of special spectators from the water who come to be entertained. To give better description, the two types of aquatic audience are discussed under two subheadings: water spirits as aquatic audience and canoe audience and participation. It is greatly important to formulate these titles because, in this way, it would become evident that, aquatic audience, as much as an embodiment of two separate worlds is an original heritage of the African culture. It is to show also that it is within the participatory masquerade festival tradition of the Ijo people. The division is to further emphasize the fact that the festival serves both physical and spiritual functions.

5. Water Spirits as Aquatic Audience

Over 60% of the littoral Niger Delta of Nigeria is populated by the Ijo (Ijaw) tribal nation. Apparently conditioned by the inseparable relationship with the aquatic environment, the Ijo as a people believe in the existence of an underwater world of gods. These gods and goddesses are seen as the supernatural patrons of the human community. In their own realm, the said gods exist according to rank and hierarchy but are usually independent, possessing their own powers and areas of influence. In quest to maintain a harmonious balance in the relationship, the water gods are regularly consulted, worshipped and prayed to in every circumstance. These water spirit beings who are believed to have the powers to regulate the affairs of man are totemically represented in the carved images used as masks in festivals. The artfully carved images which are placed on the head to express the presence of the respective divinities are called *Owuama*. It is strongly believed that the water beings also come around to watch masquerade dances. The spirit beings come fully and strongly and sometimes do influence the course of the events and possess the masquerades. Ifie (1994) alludes to this in the words that, 'the gods from the waters in Izon (Ijo) folk religion come on land and mingle with human beings either in the market or during festivals, especially during masquerade dances (p. 106). In the opening passage of the first scene of JP Clark's *Ozidi*, there is a clear indication of the relationship of the Ijo people with their various gods:

Trouble is that, before we perform for your pleasure and benefit tonight, we must first have a sacrifice to placate our hosts from the sea. Oh, yes, there are special spectators streaming all around you right now even though you may not see them. And the seven girls we ask of you, all virgins mind you, alone can beat offerings to our guests from the sea and so establish between us a bridge (p. 1).

Pre-festival rituals and ceremonies are common features of Ijo religion. Some of the rituals undertaken are efforts to officially invite the gods from the water to come and be part of the festival. A masquerade festival cannot commence when approval has not been granted by the gods. It is accompanied with great pomp when the Oracle, after days of negotiation with the gods, makes a public declaration of a favourable decision of the gods. The sacrifice that heralds the commencement of *osuopele* festival is called *Owu-youmo*. It is used to announce the date and declare the official arrival of the spirit beings.

The sacrifice to the water beings in Ijo religion is called *beni-kamai*, entertain water, that is water beings. Usually, in *Osuopele* festival, before the principal masquerade performs the ritual of cutting the symbolic gate of rafia fronds to gain entrance into the main performance arena, the priest makes prayers and invocations to give reverence and recognition to the gods who have come to enjoy the festivities. The biscuits, sugar and Fanta thrown into the water by the priest to entertain the invisible personalities who have come with an overwhelming aura of authority to spiritually superintend the ceremonies helps to situate the masquerade in a transcendental realm. While the people acknowledge the presence of the unseen guests from the water, it is a typical practice of the Ijo people to ritually ward off the ones grouped under the category of malignant elements. The unwanted spirits who are believed to have come with mischievous and untoward intentions are eased out or appealed to for good conduct and cooperation.

A respectable distance from the performance area is maintained by the audience to allow the performance of *beni-kamai* and *owu-ten* rituals which are basic to the festival. The *beni-kamai* ritual is done repeatedly on every performance day, while the *owu-ten* ritual, which is performed to appreciate the cooperation of the gods and bid them farewell, comes on the last day of the festival to mark the end of the season. The distance is also to avoid being hurt by stones and other objects being indiscriminately hurled by some ferocious masquerades. The open stretch of water which now exists as a result of the distance between the shoreline stage where the rituals are carried out and the area of water occupied by the canoes is a sacred stage where the guests from the water are said to congregate. It is at this spot the *Osuopele beni-koro* act, where the *Osuopele* masquerade frantically attempts to join the water people by heading with brisk steps towards the deep of the river, is dramatised.

This is terrifying as much as an exciting moment of the performance. It is so because the mask of *Osuopele*, like many others, is derived from the water. The mask was found, as a glittering metal headpiece of a water-spirit, inside a traditional fish trap (*etiye*) by a man called *Payegbagha Oyategha*. Thus, serious caution is employed by the attendants to prevent the masquerade from going beyond the shoreline stage into the body of the water. This care is required because a masquerade that submerges with the mask on its head never returns. The frequency of the *beni-koro* act where *Osuopele* shows determination to return to its original source like a man going back to where his umbilical cord is buried significantly points to the profound association of the masquerade to the marine world. When *Osuopele* submerges in water, the frantic efforts of the *tu-kereotu* (attendants) to rescue him is a piece of dramatic entertainment. The action takes place mostly when the masquerade has gone into the ecstatic experience of trance. The possession transforms him to become restless. The purpose is to reach the spirit audience who tele-guide the actions and probably want the dance to be done in their underwater kingdom. On account of the different levels of involvement, the water spirit audience is also a highly participative audience.

6. The Canoe Audience and Participation

The canoe audience is made up of the mass of physical human beings who watch the performance from where they are anchored in the river and by following the actions happening on land. This form of audience is characterised by the canoes which are either floating or fixed in various positions in the area of water directly facing the orchestra tent. The canoes appear to be huddled together in clusters with none masking the view of another. They lie randomly and in no particular order yet the audiences are with the amazing discipline of not falling into the temptation of indulging in an action that is capable of capsizing the boat. The canoes are anchored to stones, blocks or metal objects with rope to remain in a stationary position. The rope and the anchor are folded up and put in the boat when they must change position. It makes it an audience that is not static.

In the *Osuopele* masquerade festival of *Ojobo* in Delta State of Nigeria, the audience are present both as members of the community who are traditionally entitled to share in the common heritage and as spectators whose immediate interest is to relax and enjoy the spectacle. The aquatic audience is characteristic a participative one. There is no moment of boredom or idleness, the spectators are always involved both emotionally and physically. While some find pleasure in simple enactments like lightly wriggling the body to synchronize with the rhythmic flow of the music supplied by the orchestra, others sing, ululate, clap, or shower praises on a masquerade that dances with dexterity or shows good skills as a sprinter. It is a great delight for the aquatic audience to see a masquerade succeed in lashing a competitor with his whip. Such feats are greeted with outbursts of riotous laughter and hysterical expression of excitement. The participation of the audience is voluntary and spontaneous. One delightful sight is when the audience follows the masquerade with panegyric chants of his praise name, *amgberikolokolo*, to show off their feelings of great enthusiasm, excitement and reverence. The *Osuopele* masquerade always has an enormous presence and an uncanny ability to connect with his audience at any time. The elegant appearance and the electrifying displays attract admiration and command audience veneration and vibration at all times. Those calling out to him or enjoying the dances and music onshore or eulogizing him by hailing him with his various appellations are also in full participation. The audience is also mobile. They float when there is a reason to paddle along as the masquerade moves from upstream to downstream until it finally settles at the village square to face the business of the day in real earnest. At times, some spectators paddle their canoes away from the general gathering point to go in pursuit of actions taking place in other locations. The mobile nature of the audience accentuates the connection stringing water, the forces inhabiting it and the human world. This is because the spirit beings, like the live audience, also move along with actions of the masquerade with equal strength of interest.

7. Conclusion

The importance of the audience in *Ijo* masquerade festival is to the extent that without it nothing is qualified to be referred to as performance. Masquerade performances are regulated and climaxed by the active participation of the audience on land and the one on water. The audience on water which is termed as the aquatic audience is essentially of human and spirit beings. This audience defines the influence of the environment on the people and the cultural beliefs.

The paper observes that the audience is controlled both by the natural environment and the actions of the masquerade. Despite the religious undertone, the audience keep their preference for entertainment intact. As typical of the communal lifestyle of the *Ijo* where all affairs are approached with collective efforts, the aquatic audience is highly participative. Arguably, the nominal audience which may be translated to mean indifference cannot be grouped into the aquatic audience that is known to be a vibrant and collaborative audience.

Considering the rising literature on aquatic theatre in Africa, it is recommended that a more profound study is carried out to draw from the abundant potentials of the aquatic audience tradition. This is important and urgent to the growth and understanding of theatre in the riverine areas of Nigeria.

8. References

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