

# Aesthetics and the Rhetorical Discourse of the Ojọjọ Masquerade Festival of the Igbudu People of Warri, Nigeria.

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## **Introduction**

One of the most affected areas in the negative assumptions that derive from the colonial experience of the African people in literary and cultural studies is oral literature. This manifestation is subsumed in the uncharitable stereotypes and delineation of African oral literature as primitive and fetishistic. The advent of modern African literature in the 19th century does not in any way makes African oral literature subordinate to its written coun-

terpart. However, because of its heavy reliance on the indigenous language systems and traditional aesthetic modes, many European scholars have regarded it as below the written tradition. This idea is well expressed by Walter Ong who believes that:

In an oral culture, to think through something in non-formulaic, non-patterned, non-mnemonic terms, even if it were possible, would be a waste of time, for such thought, once worked through, could never be recovered with any effectiveness, as it could be with the aid of writing. It would not be abiding knowledge but simply a passing thought, however, complex (Ong 1982, 35-36).

Ruth Finnegan warns against this generalization and misrepresentation of the two literary traditions especially in terms of creativity and authenticity. According to her, there “is no clear-cut line between ‘oral’ and ‘written’ literature, and when one tries to differentiate between them – as has often been attempted – it becomes clear that there are constant overlaps” (Finnegan 2012, 2).

The basic tenets of post-colonialism derive essentially from the reaction of the colonised people through their acts against western epistemologies. However, there is currently the tendency for the colonised people, due to long period of disorientation, to see their literary productions and even their language as subordinate to those of the imperial centre. Bill Ashcroft et al in their book,

The *Empire Writes Back* describe the term postcolonial, “to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present” (Ashcroft et al. 1989, 11). According to them, the reason is simply because “there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by the European imperial aggression” (Ashcroft et al. 1989, 11).

In recent times, many of the cultures that once held the African people together are on a precipitous decline as a result of western religious orientation being sponsored by different Christian charismatic groups which see everything that constitute African cultural enactments in the form of festival, funeral rites and ritual observances as primitive and fetishistic that will certainly lead the African people to eternal perdition. The foregoing is not peculiar to Africa but the same is the case in many of the ‘third world’ countries; it is one of the tragedies that the natives in the provinces have to contend with should there be need to rescue their humanity from total collapse. Contemporary reality has shown, especially in oral traditions, that the colonised people no longer feel confident in practicing their cultural productions that have distinguished them over time; a situation that has placed the oral artist and his art as inferior to his modern counterpart. In many African societies, such indigenous observances like festivals and ancestral veneration are disdainfully looked upon by the youths who in a single swoop join the western celebration of Halloween which

is a western equivalent of ancestral veneration. The reason for this inferiority complex and artistic liturgy, Sunny Awhefeada tells us, is not far-fetched. According to him, at

the heart of the colonial agenda was the coloniser's desire to negate whatever the African privileged; and one of the casualties was orature which the intrusive colonial order branded as primitive at the expense of the scribal mode that was considered modern (Awhefeada 2011, 222).

It is against this backdrop that Ikenna Kamalu affirms that “postcolonial writings are expressions of the experiences of these marginalized, dislocated and exploited societies, and their quest to salvage their rich historical values from the cesspool of imperial domination” (Kamalu 2011,56). However, in this essay, postcolonial rhetoric is not set to wage eternal war against western epistemologies but to show that African oral literature in the form of festivals is an authentic brand of literature and not a variant of western literature.

Performance holds a significant place in the realisation of artistic and cultural productions; in song-poetry, narratives and even in dramatic enactments in traditional oral societies. Without performance, an oral piece is frozen and cannot be appreciated. This is so, because, the piece is not written down somewhere as in the literate

culture, but composed and memorised by artist(s). Until such artistic creations already memorised by artist(s) are performed, essentially before an audience, it cannot be said to have been realised. In festival for instance, these oral artistic and cultural productions such as song-poetry, tales, dance, mime, drumming, etc. find useful channels of expression in masquerades and ritual displays. In fact, festival constitutes the theatre, in the real sense of the word that embodies all the strands of traditional artistic and cultural productions and their realisation nuances. It is in this regard that Olu Obafemi informs us that “the contemporary theatre of Africa is linked to and draws from individual rituals, festival, folklore, and seasonal rhythms of ancient and indigenous performance traditions” (Obafemi 2016, 180).

Festival, according to Dumbi Osani, “is a general celebration characterised by feasting, merriment and entertainment, observed to mark a religious faith, commemorate a historical event or repeat an ancient practice” (Osani 2017, 184). It reinforces the people’s belief in the supernatural and establishes their desire to align with the common values of the past. Through festival celebration, the African people not only imitate actions and ritual observances of time past; either in song, dance, mime and or mock dramatic enactment that shows their reliance on the spiritual essence of the community, but serves as the circumambient presence of the gods and ancestors in the affairs of men. It is in this light that

Stanley Amah believes that festivals

are a people's conscious communal effort to retain a hold on their ancestors and to invoke both these great ones and the communal deities whose blessings and goodwill are indispensable to the well-being of the community (Amah 1986, 50).

The Ojọjọ masquerade festival, which constitutes the focus of this essay, not only acts as a distinct artistic performance by which the people regulate their spiritual link with their ancestors, but provides authentic evidence for the interpretation of drama in festival celebration.

The Ojọjọ masquerade festival is celebrated exclusively by Igbudu community, one of the seven communities that make up the Agbarha-Ame kingdom of Warri, Nigeria. The other communities in the Agbarha-Ame kingdom of Warri are Otovwodo-Agbarha, Oteghele, Ukpokiti, Ogonu, Edjegba and Okurode-Urhobo. Although the festival is celebrated exclusively by the Igbudu people, the festival bears essential spiritual essence to the kingdom as a whole. Thus, during its celebration, whenever there is a spiritual quagmire that involves a masquerade and a community member, it is the Chief Priest of the Agbarha-Ame kingdom known as *Olowu-Edje* that acts as the spiritual head who communes with the ancestors and the Ojọjọ deity for the spiritual well-being of the entire community. Significantly, though, the Ojọjọ deity chooses its own Chief Priest, *Osedjo* and Priestess, *Oniedje*

as different from the Chief Priest of the community. In most cases, the community's Chief Priest is also accepted by the deity as its priest.

The festival which is celebrated bi-annually by Igbudu community attracts many visitors from virtually all the communities that made up the Agbarha-Ame kingdom and beyond. This is because, the *Ọjọjọ* masquerade festival constitutes what Osani refers to as a traditional festival, which according to him, “are integral aspects of the people’s culture and originated from their apprehension of, and consequent responses to, the forces operative in their immediate environment and the universe” (Osani 2017, 184). The *Ọjọjọ* masquerade festival takes as its principal objectives, artistic entertainment and the purification of the community. This idea quickly comes to mind when one considers the religious and spiritual observances that come to play during the festival. The masquerades represent for the people, a spiritual ideal to re-jig the spiritual health of the community; that is, the people’s relationship with the deity of prosperity, *Ọjọjọ!* Perkins Foss informs us that “Urhobo masquerade performances do not exist primarily for the pleasure of the audience and participants; rather, they are created for the enjoyment of the spirits themselves” (Foss 2004, 101).

The foregoing idea about the relationship between the people and the spirits during festival is well embedded in the people’s folklore. The rhetoric of superstitions and myths are foregrounded in many of the African festivals

as means to adumbrate the facility of the people's socio-cultural heritage by way of making statement about the people's beliefs. For instance, in a personal interview with Elder Atortor Maku, of Igbudu community on October 8, 2019, he noted with certainty, that all the masquerades that participate during the festival come directly from the river and thus represent the spirits. When I informed him that some of the individuals bearing the masquerade masks can sometimes be identified by keen observers, he insisted without empirical explanation, that all the masquerades come from the river as spirit representations of the Ojọjọ deity.

These superstitions and myths surrounding the masquerades explain how they are seen and revered by the people in the community. Even if the masquerades are identified as members of the community, the people must suspend their disbelief and accept the superstition that they are no longer the people they used to know, that lived around them – they are now gods, water spirits sent to intermingle with the people to establish equilibrium between the living and the ancestors. In traditional African societies, the dead ancestors and spirits are believed to return and dwell among the people during festival celebrations. Michael Dash agrees with this notion of superstition as a counter rhetoric of postcolonial discourse when he explains that postcolonial literature resorts to “myths, legends and superstitions of the folk in order to isolate traces of a complex culture of sur-



vival which was the response of the dominated to their oppressors (and to) shatter the myths of ‘historylessness’ or ‘non-achievement’” (Dash 1995, 200). It should be well observed here that in time past, it was believed that the ancestors dwelt among the people but became offended as a result of human pollution and left to their present abode in the spirit world. However, they return only during festivals especially during ancestral worship typical of Halloween festival, dedicated to remembering the dead by the west. This is because, during festival, the community is cleansed, creating a habitable environment for them to relate with the people. In most cases, they only find solace in the community or family shrines which is believed to be free from human pollution – there, non-initiates are not expected to enter and defile it.

During its celebration, the festival parades over twenty-five to thirty different types of masquerades. On the days the festival, which lasts ten days, would be celebrated, the chief priest would invite the entire community to assemble at the village square (*Otorere*) with a bottle of gin. It is at this gathering that the day of the commencement of the festival is announced. When it is accepted, serious preparation would start. On the evening of that day, two masquerades: *Ogbrodje* and *Adjamikoko* would appear. They would go around the community, visiting important personalities who would in turn entertain them. This visitation, which lasts two days, signals the commencement of the festival. It is expected at this

point that those visited by the masquerades should have kept their homes clean to receive the blessings of the deity. This spiritual visitation tallies with the point made by Osani when he posits that in “many communities in Nigeria, traditional New Year Festival, by whatever names they are called, usually entail cleansing rituals through which individuals, families and entire communities are purified and thus renewed in preparation for entry into the new year”(Osani 2017, 193).

For instance, in the morning before the masquerades appear in their sequence, the drummers would enter the arena that acts as a stage to prepare their drums. When they are satisfied with the preparation, they would start drumming with singers, comprising men and women, performing different songs specially composed to praise the Ojọjọ deity. As the orchestra plays on, able bodied men, women and elders dance in a processional ritual into the arena. Anyone that is not costumed ostentatiously for the festival is not allowed to enter the arena. The dancers dance to the rhythm of the drums as well as the songs which adumbrate the people’s closeness to the deity. Darah gives an idea of what constitutes aspects of many of Urhobo annual festival of which the masquerade display/dance takes a significant stage. According to him, songs, dance, and drama dominate these events, which, because “merriment and the aesthetic effect are their prime objective, tend to blend ritual and secular arts” (Darah 2004, 110). Thus the moment the mas-

querades enter the arena, the dancers withdraw into the background to allow the masquerades perform as the song and the drum tempo is increased. As I have noted elsewhere, the masquerades “rely on the tempo of the drums and each drumbeat is punctuated by the exchanges between the lead singer and the group (masquerades) – all accentuated in dramatic fashion” (Omoko 2016, 98).



Fig. 1: A masquerade being led into the arena by participants ostentatiously dressed for the festival

After the *Ogbrodje* and *Adjamikoko* are done with their parades and visitations, *Igbine* masquerade would appear. Three *Igbine* masquerades would perform at the village

square for two days and they would be followed by *Igberagha*. These masquerades are specially costumed with dreadlocks representing the sea god called *Ogberagha* in the people riverine ecology. Like the *Igbine* masquerades, three *Igberagha* masquerades would perform at the village square to entertain the audience.

On the seventh day, *Edjo-Evwere* (literally, Ijo Masquerades) ranging between twenty and twenty-five would appear. Their appearance typifies the Urhobo people's affinity with other riverine communities of the Niger Delta. Darah underscores this point when he explains that "in the Niger Delta, the Urhobo, the Ijo, the Isoko, and the Itsekiri share the basic features of masquerade art." According to him, the "images and icons represented in the masks are drawn from the environment and folklore.... Urhobo masks depict ideas of forest spirits or celestial bodies" (Darah 2004, 112)

Hence each of the *Edjo-Evwere* masquerades carries the masks of various animals, fish and figures they need to represent their roles. Each group of masquerade has its own kind of song and instrument that accompany its dance style similar to those in other cultures. J.S. Boston writes of similar masquerade tradition among the Ibo of eastern Nigeria and explains that "each type of masquerade has a characteristic rhythm, which is produced by a subtle and intricate combination of voices, instruments, and stylized movement, and this rhythm supplies

a compulsive force to the performance, as the plot does in European drama.” According to him, “it also creates a dramatic link between the various elements of the masquerade, which are often scattered in different parts of the village” (Boston 1960, 55). Thus, the *Edjo-Emwe* would entertain the spectators/audiences for the entire day at the dance arena, displaying in flamboyant style, different artistic steps.



Fig 2: Masquerades displaying masks of various kinds of fishes

*Ogbrodje* and *Adjamikoko* masquerades would appear again on the eighth day. While on the eve of the festival's final day, *Igoni* and *Ovie-Edjo* are led into the arena by two other masquerades who act as their bodyguards. These two masquerades are resplendently costumed for the occasion. As its name implies, the *Ovie-Edjo* (king of masquerades) is a beauty to behold.

However, on the last day of the festival, all the masquerades, beginning from *Ogbrodje* and *Adjamikoko* to *Igoni* and *Ovie-Edjo* would appear at the arena to perform before a large crowd of spectators. After the end of the festival, *Okruyovwin* masquerade would come as a carrier to cleanse the community and take away all the sins of the community. *Okruyovwin* is always roughly costumed and it is stoned symbolically by children with plantain stalks. Its appearance signifies the end of the ten days of the *Ojojo* masquerade festival.

### **Dramatic Aesthetics in the *Ojojo* Masquerade Festival**

There is plenty of drama in the masquerade performances of the *Ojojo* festival of the Igbudu people of Warri, ranging from imitation, dance movements, miming, song/music, drumming, elaborate costumes and spectacle. The presence of audience and a well codified stage arrangement during the masquerade performances at the arena attest to the people's theatrical and dramatic

sense. Aesthetics (Urinrin) as used in this essay relates to the experience or feeling of beauty and satisfaction the spectator derives from the masquerades' performances. This feeling of satisfaction is significant on the basis of the masquerades' display in which the festival's artistry is conveyed. It also constitutes the overall indices of the festival, ranging from the masquerade's performances, group processions, drumming, dance, ritual and their vocal echoes. In other words, the aesthetics of the Ojojo masquerade festival is expressed through the dramatic display in which the various masquerades imitate human actions and ideas which delights the spectators. Ojaide explains aesthetic to mean "notions of beauty, taste, and artistic merit". He adds that aesthetic "involves standards and principles for judging cultural productions" (Ojaide 2009, 4).

One of the dramatic aesthetics of the Ojojo masquerade festival, therefore, is the presence of a complete and synchronised plot with organic structure and thematic message. This can be seen in the mock dramatic enactment on the final day of the festival. This dramatic enactment not only creates emotional and intellectual delight for the spectators/audience, but creates in their minds, a lasting spectacle of aesthetic satisfaction and spiritual fulfilment.

On the final day of the festival, while all the masquerades, beginning from *Ogbrodje* and *Adjamikoko* to Ig-

oni and *Ovie-Edjo* have performed in their sequence, three masquerades, specially costumed for the purpose emerge from the lots to perform the drama of “Peace and Happiness.” This dramatic enactment which normally climaxed the festival is performed in mime and presents three masquerades; one playing the role of a father, another performing that of a mother while the last, plays the role of a child – in a family setting. The three masquerades step into the arena to engage in a flamboyant display to the admiration of the spectators/audience – each dance step is punctuated by the rhythm of the drums.

However, in the midst of the excitement, the child (masquerade) is tactically withdrawn from the arena without the parents knowing. This done, the drum changes its tune to a dirge, thus jolting the parents to pay attention to their surroundings. The moment the father notices that the child is missing, he dances menacingly towards the other (the mother masquerade) with both hands spread wide. “Where is my child,” it would ask in mime. The mother responds in an “I don’t know” gesture. At this point, the atmosphere becomes charged as other masquerades in the arena bows to avoid the anger of the father (masquerade) who is bigger in size than the others. Both (father and mother) dance menacingly across the arena with the rhythm of the drums punctuating their steps. At intervals, one dances to the admiration of the spectators/audience, suddenly it remembers the



lost child and then charges towards the spectators/audience. As the suspense heightens, the father charges at the mother who bows submissively in apology for her negligence. The spectators watch with interest as both desperate masquerades make gesture to them if they had seen their child.

This mock drama is enacted for about thirty minutes, and then suddenly, the lost child is released into the arena. The mother sees it first, embraces it and happily brings it to the father. The father is excited in uniting with his child. The appearance of the child triggers uproar in the spectators/audience. The three masquerades dance to the drummers who increase the tempo of their drumming. Other masquerades join in the celebration. Thus, signalling the end of the festival.

In this mock drama, the family as a social unit is emphasized. The various actions in the mock drama within the masquerades display are not only stylised but are representation of human actions both at the family and the communal levels. It is against this background that Ruth Finnegan informs us that dramatic enactments, especially in African festival setting, should be taken seriously as aspects of drama. She believes that the most important aspect of African drama “is the idea of enactment, of representation through actors who imitate persons and events” (Finnegan 2012, 486). Moreover, the imitation and representation of human actions constitute the ba-

sic aspect of the dramatic aesthetics of the Ojojo masquerade festival. Ola Rotimi expresses this condition as a prerequisite for drama in the traditional setting when he tells us that the

standard acceptance of the term drama, within a cultural setting, at any rate, implies ‘an imitation of an action... or of a person or persons in action’, the ultimate object of which is to edify or to entertain; sometimes, to do both” (Rotimi 2014, 93).

The kind of imitation that is done in the dramatic enactment within the festival is that of actions within the family in the period of what I may call “communal innocence”, despair and triumph. Aristotle believes that imitation in drama is not of persons, “but of actions and of life.” According to him,

well-being and ill-being reside in action, and the goal of life is an activity, not a quality; people possess certain qualities in accordance with their character, but they achieve well-being or its opposite on the basis of how they fare. So the purpose of what the agents do; character is included along with and on account of the actions” (Aristotle 1996, 11).

The plot in the festival is complete and whole. That is, it has a beginning, middle and an end which constitute the standard specification of a “well-constructed plot” as recommended by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. For Aristo-

tle tells us that a “whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end” (Aristotle 1996, 11). The drama in focus begins at the point when the three masquerades enter the arena to perform in order to entertain the spectators/audience. This takes us into the conflict, the point where the child is withdrawn from the arena. This, we can call the middle and then the end, which bestrides the point when the child is found and the triumphant dance that follows.

Furthermore, mime which is a significant aspect of drama is well foregrounded in the festival. In fact, the entire action in the drama is enacted in mimes and gestures. Robin Horton expresses the significance of mime in masquerade enactment thus:

The masquerade is not intended as the enactment of verbal narrative. Its dominant symbols are those of rhythmic gesture, dictated by the drum; and in so far as its verbal commentaries have a use, it is one of directing attention to the broad area in which the meaning of the dance gestures lies... it is left to the language of dance to fill in the detail which makes the masquerades rich and satisfying to its audience” (Echeruo 2014,168).

Another aspect of the dramatic aesthetics in the Ojò-jò masquerade festival is the use of elaborate costumes. This is done to accentuate the beauty of the various masquerades. The *Ovie-Edjò*, like other masquerades in

the arena for instance, is lavishly costumed. Its head is costumed with a mask of a finely carved wood variously painted to look like a mermaid. From the head to its knees are clothed with layers of red cloth with flowing red silk scarves. Small gingerly bells are tied around the waist to give a rattling sound as it works – while the ankles are wrapped around with a specially collected rattling shells. The feet are painted with red earth so that when it dances to the rhythm of the drums, hitting the rattles on its ankles with the small machete on its hand, it keeps the spectators enthralled.



Fig 3: A masquerade in vigorous dance display

The masquerade dances by lifting one leg from the ground after the other in a dramatic and synchronised

manner with the drums and the bells around its waist punctuating each movement. Foss explains the significance of the bells and rattles (kernels) to the masquerades dramatic display by saying that “as the dancer drives his legs up and down in the characteristically quick, staccato steps of the *edjotọ* dance, these bells and kernels complement the drum patterns that lead the dancer” (Foss 2004, 103). According to him, they play “a crucial role in the final steps of each dancer’s display, when he crashes first one, then the other foot to the earth in precise time to the drummer’s beat” (Foss 2004, 103). At some point, it sends the spectators roaring by hitting the rattles on its ankles dramatically with the drums answering its gestures to the admiration of the audience. All these are the artistic nuances that make the *Ọjọjọ* masquerade festival of the Igbudu people of Warri a cultural and dramatic enactment in its own right.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing discussion has shown that drama constitutes one of the major artistic goals of masquerade festival in Africa. The masquerade displays, the imitation of human action that is complete in itself, the presence of spectators/audiences, and the elaborate costumes adumbrates the full condiments of drama in its complete sense. The *Ọjọjọ* festival evaluates the moment of triumphs and achievements of the people, their link with the ancestors and foregrounds, in dramatic representation, in the dramatic sequence of the festival, the

rich cultural and artistic heritage of the African people. We can thus argue that African masquerade festivals are ready mine for drama and theatres. If this is true, therefore, there the need to reclaim, record and store as many of these declining African cultural heritage as a means to preserve them for future generation before they are finally buried by colonial sentiments. Ben Okri enjoins us in this regard to retrieve as many as the African oral traditions that we can recover because “it is not the loss that defines us, but recovery.” According to him, one “has to read the clues of what seems to be lost, in art, artefacts, intuitions, dreams. The artist is a conduit through which lost things are recovered” (in Kamalu 2011, 68). In doing this, the recovery must be total in the sense that whatever is recovered should be part of the overall reclamation process of the pristine cultural heritage of the African people. This is necessary because Achebe had warned us, “until the lions produce their own historian, the story of the hunt will glorify only the hunter” (Achebe 2000, 73).

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