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CHILDREN'S MOONLIGHT GAMES "EKPAEKPAÑ" SIGNIFICATION AND (INTRA) ETHNIC COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Moonlight games were great moments for entertainment, enlightenment and social interaction in traditional societies like Ibibio society. With the invasion of the traditional society by modern superstructures, either brandished as education or christened as civilization, the traditional forms have suffered disintegration and insignification. Values are no longer placed on many traditional modes of entertainment and communication despite their proven charisma, aesthetics and plausible paradigms. Children's games, such as "ekpaekpañ" have nearly become extinct, despite the mass of rural population still occupying the African literal landscape. This paper makes a case for "ekpaekpañ", one of those Ibibio children's games, and presents defensive justifications for its reckoning in today's society.

Introduction:

"Everything that is said is as self-evidently true as it is commonly and consistently neglected ..." Arthur Symons.

Cherry's (1978) position is that no new mode of communication replaces older ones but rather some of the functions of the older can be taken over by the new mode. This gives strength to this discourse. Even if the modern comes with easeful applicability yet for the reason of historical antecedents and cultural renaissance, the attempts here find justifications. Perhaps it is in this light that Wilson (1997:25) had argued "ordinarily, people do not seem to see anything of aesthetic value in traditional media arts". Such people (if they genuinely exist at all) would have neglected the still-holding subjective theory of aesthetics; namely, that "beauty is in the eyes of the beholder" (Akpan and Etuk 1990:24). Indeed, traditional people who nonetheless till today occupy the earth's space with so-called modern people, still uphold their own against contemporary communication persuasions. They tend to see their 'home-grown / groomed' communication modes as lofty, effective and promotable. Culture across the world is, courtesy of global communication possibilities, enjoying criss-crossing malleabilities in juxtaposing dimensions and dynamic mix. Therefore, no culture is static; no culture is authentically pure without "foreign contaminations", and perhaps no culture can be extinct except (maybe) its people become endangered to extinction.

The Ibibio peoples of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria are not extinct. They (presently) constitute the 4th largest ethnic group

of nations in Nigeria. They remain a people (at least) nationally known for their envious cultural heritage.

Communication accounts not only for strong indices of this cultural heritage, but also, sustains it. For this reason and perhaps the pride of "one's own thing" this paper makes this plunge into the milieu of Ibibio songs, games, essence and {intra}ethnic communication, using ekpaekpañ for its reference if not showcasing.

Songs at all times and in all cultures tell a story. With or without accompaniments, songs communicate feelings, moods, backgrounds, beliefs, ideologies and the like. In the circular world or ritual enactments, songs tend to open the gates to the domains of the gods and deities for appeasements. They form the other side of the coin to eggs' breakage. You may ask what songs do to the gods-Your guess may not be wrong for if the gods grant passage and entrants through chants and songs for human entreaty, then songs, apparently, make them happy. In Christian worship, songs play an uncompromising role. The bible (psalm 100: 4) instructs clearly "Enter into His gates (presence) with thanksgiving and His courts with praise". It is from this perspective that ekpaekpañ cultural game / song will be analysed in this essay to establish its significations and communicativeness.

There is hardly any African story of the moonlight experience that does not juxtapose or interlude or commence or conclude with songs. Songs are integral in the cultural dynamics of the African people. Songs on their own 'aesthesicise' the story, give it form, uniqueness and weight. Traore (1972), Nwosu (1981), Igoil (1984), Agu (1987) and Okanlawon (1987) write (with passion) on the essence of songs in traditional performances whether of the children or adult forms and specialities.

Games in perspective are unlike football, badminton or boxing. Okanlawon (1987:77) clears the air that "All rhymes and songs are used at play, this is why they are often called games, rhymes and songs". In further probing he lists "clapping of hands", "trying to put out complimentary legs out on a particular count" (77), "blindfolded games" (78) and game that is organized in a circular formation" (79) as examples. These therefore are exemplifications of African games under moonlight scenery in the main but sometimes during sunlight as well. Certainly, the games entertain and shape up the biological functions of the body, therapeutically, but beyond that, they evince cultural communication dynamics as well. The select-game in this discourse "ekpaekpañ" shall show its cultural and communicative values and essence.

From the aforegone, it becomes instructive that games and songs are complementary. One cannot extricate games from songs or divorce songs and games. It would appear that any (African) attempt at doing so would tantamount to bastardization and illegitimacy. And that would be both criminal and taboo in Ibibio consideration.

Theoretical Positions:

Literature on Ibibio culture is not much. However, accounts from Talbot (1912,1914,1923 and 1926) and Jefferys (1950,1951,1955,1956,1966), lend sufficient credence to studies on the Ibibio people's culture, among others. It is from these sources that the primordial forms of entertainment typical of the Ibibios can be "excavated". Both Talbot and Jeffreys acknowledge moonlight games as integral in the nuances of entertainment and other socio-interractional forms in Ibibio land. The religions and

other belief systems are also strongly suggested by some of the accounts. Ekong (2001: 43-70) elaborately holds discourses on same, clearing doubts on them, which may have possibly beclouded the older accounts.

Moonlight games were a longed - for moment for all, especially in the dry season when the soil was dry. Games associated with different age groups, took the scene on the squares. Children were highly prized in Ibibio society as they were seen as torches of the future. That explained why couples without children were much in distress; and often, a man had to send away the woman who was not fruitful (by their pro-man world standards) and marry another one. Or if the man really held attraction for the woman, he would allow her to stay while the man however married another woman to add to her in the hope of raising children, desirably males. Children therefore were prioritized, recognized and well cared for. Not only were they "assigned" special games but far beyond that they were encouraged to belong to children's recognizable cults. As highly revered as the Ekpo cult was, some male children were initiated into it, while "ekpo ntok eyen", meaning, "masquerade for small boys", also paralleled the adult equivalent in existence and practice (Ekong, 2001).

This discourse on "ekpaekpañ" games, among several games by children, was motivated by the sheer regularity with seemingly curious inevitability, which the game featured in children's circles. The *raison d'être* for it shall be articulated in the aspects sub-titled "signification".

Signification literally means meanings or substrates of meanings. The choice of signification as perhaps opposed to the usual thing - significance- is deliberate, not only for the special

substrates of meanings as shall be unraveled in ekpaekpan out also because by contemporary theatrical criticisms, especially post-modernist critical persuasions, signification has become more commonly applied in theoretic or theatri-critical praxis. It is in this light that Auslander (1997) can best be appreciated, for example his "the art of signification produces its own significance..." and, "activity of signification"(28), "mechanics of theatrical signification" (34) and "theatrical significations...of theatrical sign functions..." (65). In "ordinary" parlance, whereas the sentence "the signification of a house" can go for the "significance" or "usefulness" or "function of a house", in the post-modernist (re)considered and (re) constructive dimensions, it would certainly have packed more "signifiers" than ordinary. This is the (sub-textual) level if not "decoded" level, but certainly (re)considered latitude with which Auslander speaks of "the act of signification" producing "its own significance".

In the explications on ekpaekpañ, there will definitely be exemplifications, that is, something like what a good teacher does on complex points to his students. This detail is ineluctable as it is geared towards properly situating the game, ekpaekpañ, on its deserved (intra) ethnic reverence.

This paper, after all, believes that cultural ambitions (such as would be presented here) are in order. Kershaw (1999) is affirmatively positioned that theatre is for relevant societal services, particularly theatre which serves political purposes. He unequivocally defends that cultural ambition is in order (15), since it can radically alter existing structures to the extent of effecting a fundamental modification in the cultural life of the nation. Schechner (1988) had earlier on, in his seizing throe, "polemised" on "entertainment and efficacy" (75) as the only valid theatre.

While "entertainment" is very clear here Schechner's "efficacy" is the same thing as Kershaw's "relevance", namely theatre "practicing" itself as an instrument for change. Undoubtedly, this paper would wish to present ekpaekpañ in the dialectics that should accord it a place of reckoning in contemporary society. And this position is vehemently supported by Boal (1979:155). "Theatre is action! ...Perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself, but have no doubts it is a rehearsal for revolution!"

There is no reason why aspects of Ibibio culture, which show prudential relevance to meaningful living should be allowed to wane into insignification, and then installmental extinction. It was Oyin Ogungba (1978) who had made a thesis for the possibility of the death of the gods. He had argued that if the adherents of a particular Yoruba god suddenly turned their backs on him, he would definitely die of undevoteism. The quanta of concluded irreverent acts from disappointed worshippers who abandon usual sacrificial offerings to the god, {which used to sustain his existence- continuum}, would force the (embattled) god into premature starvation and subsequent death. Even gods die!

The unceremonial treatment of the traditional beliefs and practices by their owners, are comparable to the uncelebrated acts of undevoteism to a god by his adherents. A culture can die – like several indices and forms are already known to have done so. A major destructive plague that kills traditions in the African milieu has been identified by Lowery {1984:42}.

There is an effort abroad to destroy nationalism and supplant it by internationalism and the desecration of the

- national flag of a country. I should imagine the play would come under the Treason Act.

This truth, presented rather sarcastically was to call the attention of a people to the essence of their cultural preservation and promotion; even through performances. While “nationalism,” could stand for the local culture, “internationalism,” would definitely represent foreign culture. “The desecration of the national flag” speaks of the ignominious disregard with which the local culture has been awash[ed]. “I should imagine the play would come under the treason Act” is a loaded statement which at the best challenges artists to speak up against this subtle act of elimination by replacement, and for the artist to do so without any fear of capital punishment in any form. It would appear that Lowery’s challenge has been accepted in this discourse.

Here, the artist has risked the accusation of “insurrection” against the powers that be, to present in its most glorious form, ekpaekpañ, the Ibibio children’s moonlight game and project its signification and (intra)ethnic communication significances. According to Henshaw (1986:81),

Every nation has its culture and through migration, trade, marriages, conquest and other vehicles of change, there is interaction, a borrowing and giving action which tend to bring peoples together and seems to be taking place all the time.

The Ibibio nation has its unique culture and the children’s game ekpaekpan, happens to be one expression of that culture. It

is already, very neglectfully treated with (apathetic distaste). Never in the world has any dispensation been greeted with hasty affronts of ‘flying’ cultures as our time. Be that as it may, (and advantageous as that can be said to be by some), an attitude of “borrowing and giving” for “interaction”, must be consciously maintained, lest one should wake up tomorrow and everything which was originally one’s own had dissolved into strange but systematic replaceable seizure and subtle but orchestrated conquest.

Ekpaekpan Game / Song: Its Etymological Nature:

Join us under this full moon at the “Ibom” square!

Ekong nke-e, nke ekong Abasi...

Ekpaekpañ oho, ekpaekpañ oho-o

Ekpaekpañ otop owo uduañ anwaña

Ntokeyen usó usó, ntokeyen ukauka

Esomo ke obioekpo usó, ke obio ekpo uka

Ooh-oh—hoo, ooh oh-hoo!

{Attempted} English Translation:

Story story...Story!

Oh ekpaekpañ, oh ekpaekpañ

If ekpaekpañ stings you, you’ll shit in your pants.

Therefore, kids, disappear into your fathers world, your mothers world.

Game/song Description:

In ekpaekpañ moonlight game, there is a demarcated space of safety within which ekpaekpañ cannot sting. A leader calls one person from the group of players. The players could be in an

undefined group or in a circle, it does not really matter. A leader is the one who usually enthrones or clads or mounts or personifies

One of the most exciting moments in ekpaekpañ game is if the leader becomes the very person stung. He would have to

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