

AFRICAN THEATRE AND THE PERFORMANCE SPACE: IBOKU URUAN CULTURAL FESTIVAL OF AKWA IBOM STATE IN VIEW

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Abstract

In the African society, the past have been kept alive for centuries through indigenous festival performances, which are peculiar to the people that celebrate it. Festivals represent the sociological desire of the people, social moral, historical and religious activities. This study is on the Iboku Uruan Cultural Festival as revived in the last three years. The Festival takes place at the Mbiaya Uruan in Uruan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. It is an annually celebrated festival that is conceptualized to promote the rich culture of the people in celebration of the Ekpe Society by its members. The Ekpe Society is an ancient Secret Society of the Cross River State and Uruan/Oron People of Akwa Ibom State, which is saddled with the responsibility for the administration and organisation of the community and society at large. Historically, the society has been involved in social justice issues, while using its powers and influence to promote fairness and equality within the community. Its responsibilities go beyond Governance, with its functions ranging from establishment/formulation of societal morals and the regulation and enforcement of those societal morals. The Iboku Uruan Festival, as an African Theatre is performed in a secluded performance space as created by the member of the Ekpe society. This area is considered to be the heart of the Ekpe festival and is permeated with spiritual powers and energy. The circular arrangement reflects the cyclical nature of the Ekpe society and its relationship to the natural world. The Ekpe participation in the festival serves as a link between the living community members and their ancestors, who are believed to be present in spirit during the festival.

Keywords: African Theatre, Performing Space, Cultural Festival.

Introduction

Africans in general are well known in the world for their rich cultural tradition which is usually manifested in their different forms of artistic performances through festivals and other oral art forms, such as folktales, folklore, and dancing, drumming, chanting, ballad and so on. Africans are arguably the most culturally diverse populace in the world. They possess a variety of forms of socio-cultural and politico-religious world views which in essence are intended at expressing their uniqueness as a people and their style of communal existence. African Culture is rich and comprises all aspects of life in relation to: religion, music, dressing, mode of eating and all human endeavours. Culture itself has been said to be a term derived from Latin term 'Cult' or 'Cultus' meaning tilling or refining. Okon Uya asserts that; "Culture, is the total way of life of a people expressed in their technological, economic, social and political institutions and structures, as well as in their values and norms, is never static but resilient, dynamic, and adaptive, often responding to the challenges it confronts, whether

from within or without (22). To Ekaette Edem, “culture in its diversity is distinguished by virtue of its specific historical evolution and its unique characteristics making each culture structurally unique and original” (81).

Culture is also acquired through socialization and as a set of historically created decisions transmitted from generation to generation as guide for human life living within a particular community. This conforms with the definition of culture by Sofola A., who sees culture as a “learned pattern of behaviour, idea, beliefs, and the artifacts, shared by a people and socially transmitted by them from one generation to another” (ix). Culture in its totality includes the ideas, value, customs and artifacts of a community. It reflects the people cuisines, clothing, way of life and behavior. According to Ajayi, “culture is perceived as a way of life or the totality of all human efforts and achievements in the struggle for survival in the midst of unfriendly and militant forces of nature” (1). A people’s ways of life here refers to such characteristics as customs, traditions, ceremonies, rites, rituals, language and style of dressing. These ways of life covers, guides, governs and demarcates each society from another. Cultural practices such as festivals, funerals, traditional theatre, storytelling, initiation, and so on became ceremonial. Ekaette mentioned that “Nigeria known and described as the Giant of Africa is rich and endowed with cultural resources, is one of the largest and geographically, socially and culturally most diversified African country... Because of its diversity of people and culture, Nigeria has been distinguished in the field of arts to include several festivals and other cultural forms” (81). Culture is closely linked with life, which it makes us who we are.

Concept on Festivals

Festival is an event that is usually staged by a community; it celebrates some unique events in a community. Olakunle Ojo asserts that; “a festival is an event usually and ordinarily staged by a community, which centers on and celebrates some unique events and aspect of the community” (16). Festivals tell the past of the people, assist in easy comprehension of the present and a projection into their future as an oral literature. Festivals represent the sociological yearnings of the people, social moral, historical and religious deeds. It is most times seen as the coming together of people from different or the same tribes and culture to celebrate culture and the way of life of that given society. Community and cultural celebrations as a form of gathering may be entertaining in nature, conducted or organized by a person or group of persons, organization, firm, association, or even the government within and outside a particular locality and may not be limited to things as carnivals, sports, concerts, music performance, dance and drama presentation, arts and craft, fairs, etc. According to Hunyadi, Zsuzsa, Perter and Janos, “cultural events concentrated in a few days (Weeks) have been known throughout the entire history of humankind” (7). He went further to say that there is no precise definition of festival although it has its basis to some sort of historical root used by a set of people to attract the attention of casual visitors, travelers and tourist. The entertainment derived from festivals satisfies basic aesthetic qualities that insinuate them to indigenous folks, dance, music and many more as everyone looks forward to the performance. Festivals reveal the culture of every society in the world, bring people together and as well shows the different from one society or people to another.

In the African society, the past has been kept alive for centuries through indigenous festival performances, which are peculiar to the person that celebrates it. And the life of a community is always renewed during festivals which also serve as a means of reunion between the old

and the young, friends and family members. It is celebrated with cultural values, feasting, jubilation, entertainment, exchange of gifts, drinking and merrymaking with beautiful traditional attire and make-up. Festivals cover enormous range of events from harvest to thanksgiving, marriage to widowhood, birth to death, as well as installation of new chiefs. Due to these essentialities of festivals, scholars have described it in various ways. According to Nsofor M. C.: "Festival is a period set apart by communities or groups of individual, for commemorating important events in the life of community or an individual" (6). It associates with dances, musical performances, incantations, prayers and sacrifices to the gods and the spirits of the ancestors. During these festivals, the life of the community is renewed, revived and fortified through certain rituals that take place during that time as well as the entertainment and jubilation that follows. Festive period serves as a means of re – union between old and new friends as well as family members far and near.

Concepts on Theatre and the African Performance Space

Historically, theatre has been in existence since people first gathered together to listen to someone else tell a story mostly in the evenings, sometimes called in the African context "Tales by Moonlight". This consisted of friends and family who shared the responsibilities of director, actor manager, audience and performers, trading roles back and forth as long as someone had a story to share. At other times some people say that theatre emerged from myth, ritual and traditional festivals/ ceremonies. According to Oscar Brockett; "in seeking to describe its (theatre) origin, one must rely primarily on speculation, since there is little concrete evidence on which to draw. The most widely accepted theory, championed by anthropologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's, envisions theatre as emerging out of myth and ritual" (1). Although origin in ritual has long been the most popular, it is by no means the only theory about how the theatre came into being. The act of storytelling; relating and listening to stories are seen as fundamental human pleasures. Thus, recalling of an event (a hunt, battle, or other feat) is elaborated through the narrator's pantomime and impersonation and eventually through each role being assumed by a different person (Brockett, 5). The early societies perceived connections between certain actions performed by the leaders of the group, the participants, spectators and the desired result of the whole society. The actions moved from habit to tradition, and then on to ceremony and ritual. The formulation of these actions and their subsequent repetition and rehearsal broke the ground for drama and theatre in Nigeria.

At this time, performance began from children's playground, where unconsciously, a circular seating formation was made and the game played in the center of the circle. It could also be traced to the beginning of moon light-games, where different experiences in life were told by individuals to their peer groups and re-enacted within themselves at that moment and then extended to other community celebrations. Theatre as performance, we could deduce began simply in the Arena Stage or Theatre-in-the-Round, which as we have said, consisted of a stage situated in the center of an arena, with the audience surrounding it at all sides. Entrances and exits were made through aisles created by the spaces separating audience members, in sections. The performers during this time were members of the community, sometimes from a local group of village entertainers. They would arrive at a particular village square or center, calling people's attention with songs and music or sometimes go round to inform the people, giving them an update of what was to come next.

At certain time, the people, on their own gathered to witness a variety of performances, exhibitions, traditional wrestling, dance and music and other variations detailing the life of the people living in that community. As the audience trooped into the performance area or space, a large circle, in some cases, may be drawn on the ground or a square is made between a number of tall trees to allow for enough space and a great demarcation between the drama troupe and the villagers. This type of stage left actors exposed to the audience from all sides. There was also no specific fixed seating arrangement at that period. The audience tended to sit in a round formation, as the elders and some other senior persons in the community used the wooden seats made from their natural resources like bamboo and palm trees specifically designed in a manner to suit the people and their culture. Children and some youths created personal spaces in front and sat comfortably on the ground while some just stood around to watch. A few others would prefer to stay on top of any nearby tree to have a clearer view of the entire event. The audience, by this arrangement was therefore placed quite close to the action. Such closeness provoked a feeling of intimacy and involvement.

Nigerian Cultural Festivals

According to Dapo Adeligba and Olu Obafemi; "Nigeria has a long theatre history, reaching back to the numerous ceremonies, religious rituals and community festivals which define the existence of the people. The cycle of human life is marked by a succession of these events, from domestic occasions to the elaborate procession of rituals forms. The tradition of theatrical performances in both form and substance, evolved from these festivals and rituals" (138). From Martin Banham, "the roots of African theatre are ancient and complex and lie in areas of community festivals, seasonal rhythm and religious ritual as well as in the work of the popular entertainers and storytelling" (i). Theatre in Nigeria is rooted to traditional festivals and religious rituals, which include; Marriage Festivals, New Yam Festivals, Naming Festivals, new Moon Festivals, Funeral Festivals, Rites of Passage, Traditional Religious Festivals, 'Ebre' Festival, 'Ekpo' Festivals, Initiation Ceremonies, Masquerading, Puppetry, carnivals. Kenneth E. opines that, "the traditional theatre in Nigeria from contemporary theatre practice in Nigeria has a long tradition of festivals, storytelling and masquerade performances" (158). Also, Joel Adedeji says that; "It is uncertain just how and when theatre originated, but as far back as we can trace human history, various kinds of rituals considered vital to the well-being of the tribe were already using the elements needed for theatre; a performance space, performers, masks or makeup, costumes, music, dance and an audience" (3).

Nigeria as a country is endowed with lots of cultural activities and festivals, sourced from its multi-cultural communities. These festivals, be it secular, cultural or religious play essential role in any found community. According to Ekaette Edem, "Nigerian culture is being shaped by the multiple ethnic groups of about 1150 dialectics and over 521 languages" (81). In other to preserve, promote and develop the Nigerian culture, the Cultural Policy for Nigeria was designed in 1998. In part 1 section 4.1 says that "the cultural policy shall be expressed in four broad categories of state namely: (1) a preservation of culture (2) promotion of culture and (3) the establishment of administrative structure and the provision of funds for its implementation". The Cultural Policy for Nigeria is regarded as an instrument of promotion of National identity and Nigerian unity, as well as of communication and cooperation among different Nigerian and other African countries.

The Ekpe Society

The Ekpe Society is an ancient Secret Society of the Cross River State and Uruan and Oron People of Akwa Ibom State, saddled with the responsibility for the administration and organisation of the community and society at large. Its responsibilities go beyond Governance, with its functions ranging from establishment/formulation of societal morals, regulation and enforcement of those societal morals, through the administration and judicial means. The Ekpe as a secret society plays an important role in maintaining social order, settling disputes and ensuring the security of the community. Historically, the society has been involved in social justice issues, while using its powers and influence to promote fairness and equality within the community. For example, the Ekpe society has been involved in mediating disputes between families and clans, enforcing punishments for those who break the law. The Ekpe society and its members acted as the leaders while directing minds of the community. The origins of the society are steeped in mystery with differing accounts, further deepening its myth and secrecy. Its membership is restricted to initiated men, and it serves as a form of government and social control, with members having significant political and economic power. Women were not allowed to watch or participate or participate in the festival as it is believed that it brings misfortune upon the society. The Society consists of several titular levels, of which the highest levels are occupied by older members.

Moreover, it popularly said that one of the key symbols of the Ekpe Society is Nsibidi. . In order to be accepted as a member of the Ekpe Cult group, members must be acculturated, essentially learning and using a code and language that other group members will be able to recognize. This is a code that is known throughout the Ekpe Communities both in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States. It is taught and transferred from generation to generation. Nsibidi is more commonly known as the ancient form of Script, formulated by the Ekpe Society. Nsibidi being the preserve of the society is of a secret nature, known only to members of the Ekpe Society, membership of which is open to men only. From a John, member of the Ekpe Cult, the two key instructions being, for initiates are to “keep your eyes open and your mouth shut”.

Ekaette Edem asserts that, “in the past, raffia cloths were used as clothing. ...(although) special wrappers with stripped patterns are worn on ceremonial occasions by traditional chiefs and dancers, alongside masquerades of different kinds. Elaborate patchwork clothes are created with alternating squares of dyed and un-dyed raffia which sometimes are decorated with embroidered patterns. It varies in complexity and style” (95). The Ekpe masquerades wear richly coloured, woven, close-fitting, splashed red, black, purple or yellow raffia and fabric, masked from the head to the toe, with elaborate upper body pieces, which enhances the beautiful dance and body movement. “Depending on the nature of the performance and the performers themselves; boys, girls, men, women, and dancers, etc.; the designing and the colouring of the costumes (clothes) are determined by the wearers and what they want to showcase. Ekpo, Ekpe, Ibom, Ekong, Ntok-Odiodio, and other masquerades of Akwa Ibom State, for example, use dyed raffia in various colours and styles as their traditional costumes. The colours vary depending on the type of masquerade. Ekpo masquerade is known for black raffia costume, while Ekpe, Ibiom, and Ntok-Odiodio masquerades use beautifully coloured raffia costume” (Ekaette Edem, 95). The Ekpe Masquerade attire physically consists of an underlying tight-fitting body-net costume made from fibrous material sourced from a tree back. On top of this is a raffia mane worn around the chest. Also raffia attachments are worn around the wrist and ankles. On the head of the Masquerade is a

raffia attachment, completed by a wing- like hat attached to the back of the neck and also a mask that is highly revered and sacred in the Efik and Ibibio cultures. The Ukara cloth is worn by senior members is an important medium of expression of the *Nsibidi* language and script form. The hand crafted linen can only be found among the Ekpe members and initiates, where they are carefully handcrafted by most of the initiate designers, using dyed raffia and wool.

The Ekpe holds in their hands *Essang Ekpe* (Staff), while some hold *Ikpa* (Long Wooden Cane) and *Oboti or Itimo* (A Bunch of Leaves) used as props. The *Essang Ekpe* symbolises power and authority, the *Ikpa* signifies danger as it is only held by a special Ekpe named Ekpe Nkanda while *Oboti or Itimo* leaves are also known as fertility leaves that is used to symbolise peace and boundary demarcation. The leaves is said to have some spiritual powers to cleanse ills and are also used as a means of paying homage to the Chiefs of the Ekpe Society. The leaves in some region are used during coronation and it signifies royalty.

The Iboku Uruan Cultural Festival

The Iboku Uruan Cultural Festival is an annually celebrated festival that is conceptualized to promote the rich culture of the people of Uruan of Akwa Ibom State. The Uruan Community is made up four clans which are; Akpe Iboku/Etongko Mkpe Uruan, Mosongoko/Ibonde Uruan, Mataka/Ekondo Uruan and Akwa Uruan. The four clans all serve the principal deity of the Uruan People, which is *Atakpo Ndem Uuruan*, believed to be the great mother deity associated with the river/water. According to the Akpe Iboku/Etongko Mkpe Uruan Heritage Foundation, the yearly celebrated festival is to “preserve the age long culture of Uruan Nation”. The festival as revived in the last three years, takes place at the Primary School ground of Mbiaya Uruan, Uruan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State in December. According to the Chairman Board of Trustees of the Akpe Iboku/Etongko Mkpe Uruan Heritage Foundation Obong Iyamba His Highness, Peter Jerome Effiong, “the annual festival was aimed at preserving and showcasing the deep and revered culture of the Akpe Iboku/Etongko Mkpe Uruan people in particular and the richness of Uruan heritage in general”. The festival after many years of non-existence was rejuvenated in 2022 by His Highness, Peter Jerome Effiong and members of the Iboku Uruan Heritage Foundation who had the vision and passion, that saw to the birth of the festival in 2021 and its grand outing in 2022.

The festival is seen as a time for honouring and communing with the ancestral spirits of the community. It provides an opportunity for the indigenes of Uruan Inyang Atakpo to bring back the lost glory of Ekpe society. To some members, the Ekpe festival links one to the past, the root and the culture that cannot be thrown away. Rooted in ancient traditions, the Iboku Uruan Cultural festival holds great importance for the Uruan People and also serves as a time to honour their cultural heritage, connect with their ancestors, and foster a sense of unity among the people. With its rich history and diverse rituals, the Cultural Festival has become a fascinating spectacle that attracts thousands of attendees and tourists, both from within and outside Akwa Ibom State as it showcases vibrant display of dances by the Ekpe masquerades and their captivating steps as they parade through the streets, fascinating the audience with their presence. Ekpe/Iboku Uruan Cultural Festival is appreciated as a social occasion but is simultaneously enjoyed as an activity in its own right, entertaining and giving pleasure as an expression of communal life.

The Iboku Uruan Cultural Festival and the Performance Space

The Ekpe / Iboku Uruan Cultural Festival is a vibrant and culturally significant event celebrated by the Uruan people of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. The Iboku Uruan festival begins with a special prayer (libation) offered by the leaders of the Ekpe Cult to the gods, to seek the support of their ancestors to have a successful and crisis free event. This special prayer takes place at the Uruan Local Government Council. Right after the prayer is a beautiful procession by the varieties of Ekpe masquerades, the Ekpe Leaders and members along with children, representing the different villages on their different uniformly coloured attires to the main venue of the event.

The Ekpe environment is highly ritualistic and symbolic. The Cultural Festival is celebrated at the Primary School ground, in an area marked out for display by the Idem Ekpe. This area is always barricaded to avoid any form of access by non-initiate from the early hours of the day till the end of the festival. The space is decorated with traditional symbols and objects, which has *Ayai* (Palm Fronts), objects wrapped with red to represent the dangerous aspect of the Ekpe, since Ekpe (Lion) as an animal is very dangerous, white to represent the purity of the society and yellow to represent light while the green leaves represent nature, which also are the dominant colours of the Ekpe costumes.. The Ekpe festival as mentioned by Prince Atakpo John Bassey Eyo-Duke, usually take place during the day which is symbolic with the use of the yellow to represent light. According to Wolf and Block as quoted by Ekaette Edem, “lighting is perhaps the most powerful of the theatrical design elements. In its simplest form, light reveals what needs to be seen. Its intensity determines how well an object is seen, its direction dictates in what way it is seen, and its colour controls the object’s colour. Because light has such a strong impact on scenery and costumes” (209).



Plate 1: The Performance Space as decorated with Traditional Symbols and Objects



Plate 2: The Ekpe Traditional Symbols and Objects



Plate 3: The Ekpe Traditional Symbols and Objects placed at the centre of the Performance Space

Before the commencement of the festival, members of the Ekpe society often undergo a ritual cleansing and process. The performance space too is also cleared and in some communities, the performance takes place at a sacred tree decorated with objects, cloths and feathers which represents the spirit and deities of the Ekpe society. The Iboku Uruan Festival is always celebrated in an open space whereby a sacred space is created with the use of barricades, demarcating the audience and the performers. The demarcation is done with the use of palm fronds and other sacred materials by creating a large circle in the center of the primary school. This space is where the dancers perform intricate steps, by moving from one point within the circle to another in a highly choreographed manner. Each point is created and represented with the use of some objects and symbols. This space is only accessed by the initiates of the Ekpe society as performance space to participate in dance and rituals. The audience is made of both initiate and non-initiate members of the community and visitors, gathered around the perimeter of the performance space, forming a large circle around the dancers and the Ekpe performers. The senior initiates sit in some different space as prepared by them away from

the non-initiates. The non-initiate members of the community must stay outside the performance space, by respecting the secrecy and sacredness of the Ekpe tradition.



Plate 4: The Demarcation of Space for the Senior Initiates with Palm Fronts

One of the most significant moments and key point of the Iboku Uruan Festival is the competitive Nyoro Ekpe displays where ten or more Idem Ekpe competes with each other, showing their mastery and artistry in the signs and symbols of Ekpe/Nsibidi displays. It is a time when the Ekpe masquerade showcases their mesmerizing moves one after the other at the marked areas in the Primary School ground. The dance movements are highly stylized and intricate art form that requires months and years of training and practice. The Ekpe during the festival, perform elaborate dances to the beat of drums. The dances are believed to possess magical powers that off evil and bring prosperity to the community. The dance is highly rhythmic and energetic, that involves complex footwork and arm movements to beat. According to Prince Atakpo John Bassey Eyo-Duke, the Idem Ekpe performers are always given numbers at the beginning of the festival according to their appearance at the square. At the point of Nsibidi dance display, the Idem Ekpe initiate files out in a single line to take a stand according to their numbers. They are called by the moderator who is also an initiate to make a display of the Nsibidi sign language through foot work and turns while swinging a leaf as they move from one marked spot to another on the field and accompanied by a chants and drumming from another selected member. The atmosphere during the Iboku Uruan Festival is always charged and festive, with the communities within and beyond coming together to celebrate the Iboku Uruan culture and traditions. The Ekpe festival is mostly dominated by drums, chanting, singing and the shaking of bells as tied round the waist of the Ekpe masquerades.



Plate5: The Marked Out Area for the Display by the Idem Ekpe with Palm Fronts



Plate5: Close Shot of the Marked Out Area for the Display by the Idem Ekpe

In the Ekpe society, the drummer is the key figure during the festival. He is responsible for maintaining the groove and setting the rhythm for the performers. They are considered to be powerful spiritual intermediary, channeling the energy of the ancestors and the supernatural forces into the rhythm of the music. The drums and the chants are considered as a spiritual language that conveys meaning and emotion beyond words. The Ekpe music with its complex rhythms and percussion instruments are art form that is deeply connected to the spiritual and cultural traditions of the community.

Conclusion

The Ekpe festival has some elements of visual arts, music, dance, storytelling and ritual, rooted in cultural tradition. It is a festival that is deeply connected to the community, with the

performances serving as a form of communal expression and celebration, while passing down traditions and knowledge from one generation to another. As witnessed during the 2023 Iboku Uruan Festival, the performance area for the Ekpe is often laid out in a secluded performance space as created by the member of the Ekpe society. The circular space in the center of the performance area is where the Ekpe perform their complex and energetic movement of *Nsibidi* display. This area is considered to be the heart of the Ekpe festival and is imbued with spiritual power and energy. The circular arrangement reflects the cyclical nature of the Ekpe society and its relationship to the natural world. The Ekpe also make use of special sacred huts, constructed within the Primary School environs, for the Ekpe performers, accessed only by the initiates. To the members of the Ekpe society, the secluded space helps to maintain the secrecy of the rituals and knowledge associated with the society. It is a point where the Ekpe are believed to be prepared to have greater spiritual power, allowing for deeper connection with the supernatural world. Most members claim that the seclusion of the Ekpe performance space helps to protect the Ekpe traditions and rituals from outside influences by preserving the originality of the practices. The use of space was intentional and symbolic, with the performance area designed to reflect the spiritual and cultural significance of the festival. The Ekpe participation in the festival serves as a link between the living community members and their ancestors, who are believed to be present in spirit during the festival.

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