
The Igbabonelimhin Dance: The Origin

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Abstract

There are at least three category of plays in modern African drama of English expression, but our concern is a demonstration of Nigeria traditional. African idea and explores it beyond the traditional boundary. The idea of the uniqueness of drama as a literary art form was first systematically explored over the years. There was before any W/A playwright of note start writing one thing that is common on these intractable ideas is the element of propaganda, even when this means negation. But it is a fragile art-form. It also has given limitations because certain ideas and concepts, including those of the epic, true religion experience and analyses, are simply intractable to the dramatic form. In this play, we shall see the dramatic art of (drama Igbabonelimi is in relevant to dramatic presentation).

Introduction

It is the belief of the Esan that human life does not end in the physical death. It is their conception that life is made up of the body and soul; and the soul is conceived as the spirit; and the soul is conceived also. At the death of any Esan man, the spirit continues its existence in some indescribable environment, where they also commune with the living. The spirit world is seen as a duplication of life here on earth and spirits transform into persons. This means in effect that when we talk of the origin of Esan Igbabonelimhin, we are already in the terrain of magical or mysterious mythical reality-which is the reality of the hunter's experience we are going to talk about.

In Esan, hunters are seen as privileged individuals. They are seen as the closest to the living the dead, because of the odd hours they spend at nights in the thick forests. So a story exists in Esan as narrated by Mr. V.M. Odeat night and he met the spirits dancing at a cleared arena. He watched this seemingly strange dance and reported to the community, of the strong encounter. He taught the community the dance.

Igbabonelimhin is a compound word of “Igbabo” which literary means to clap and “Elimlin” which means spirit. Conjunctively, it means to clap hand or commune with the spirit. So it derives its name from the action of the dance or performance.

Mode of Operation

The mode of operation varies amongst Esan villages. This slight clash can be seen on fixed days for performances. Under normal circumstances, Igbabonelimhin is danced every two weeks of the Esan calendar and on the market days of the various villages and town that make up Esan. Igbabonelimhin could be danced annually to mark end of year celebrations, new yam festivals and organized social functions, like burial ceremonies.

Apart from the above clsh, Igbabonelimlin operates in various villages as a social cult. It has its own regulations and taboos. What this means in essence is that it operates in secrecy. Characters who perform are seen to have come from “elimhin’ (spirit world) and are revered as such, especially by non-initiates called “Ogbodu”. The non-innitates are basically women and children who have not attained the age. The age is the considered maturity age of a young male to be admitted into the Igbabonelimhin secrets. It is the age conceder when the initiate is seen capable of resisting the temptation of revealing secrets when tempted by an Ogbodu, (non-initiate) especially women).

The structure of or seniority of the elimhins (Spirit) is also hierarchical. In the context of performance, the smaller of the elimhins dance first, then the “Odion-elimhin” (senior spirit). The most senior of the elimhin which is the overall head of the cult controls the cult and the dancers. He makes sure that no one goes against the regulations of the organization.

It is seen as a taboo when an elimhin talks. Instead they make use of para-linguistic when communicating; eyesticulations and body movements. A non-initiate (Ogbodu) is not allowed into their dressing room. Because the dancers are seen as spirits they cannot talk or fight when they are dressed in their costume.

When an Igbabonelimhin group is invited to perform, they are informed some days to the day of performance so that they can have enough time to fortify the dancers and appease the gods.

On the day of performance, sacrifice is made to appease the spirits. This entails sacrificing a big he-goat. The sacrifice is usually made by “Ohen elimhin”, which is the overall head. During this process, the blood of the sacrificed goat is used to go round the head of each dancer several times before going to perform.

The Igbabonelimhin groups have their different ways of dressing. The costumed of the ‘Ohen elimhin” (head of elimhin) is different from that of the

masquerade, moderators and the elimhins (spirit) dancers so as to enable the audience differentiate the characters. The moderators and singers dress in a uniformed. They all put on a .shirt on top of a short and a small apron tied at the back without shoes on their feet. While the “Okpodu” a masquerade females symbol dresses in a female way. The masquerade is seen as the female counter part of elimhin. The Okpodu puts on an overall with sharp colours covering every part of his body and a mask is place on his head with holes on it to enable him breath well and see.

The elimhin which are the main dancers wear a unique outfit with outrageous colours. They put on an overall which covers every part of their body including their hands, sole and head. The overall is loosed to enable them dance well-twisting and bending. A net is placed on their faces to enable them to see and breathe as well. A small piece of cloth and elephant tusk is fixed at their right hand which is used for greeting people. Also, tiny bells are attached to the end of the left hand, so that when he shakes or wives his hand, the bell jingles which is used to draw people’s attention, and is also a sign of greeting “Okolo” (a little iron-like whistle) is placed on their lips to create a bussing sound which is their means of communication.

The opening greet is basically entry movements by both the human characters and the elimhins (the actual dancers). This is followed by the “asono” dance and the “Ojeke” dance which is being organized by the women initiates. The “Asono” and “Ojeke” dance is danced in a stylistic way, which entails shaking of the body and demonstration with one’s hand and gentle but calculated movements of legs to the beating of the drums. The asono and ojeke dance are followed by the main dance, Agheghele which is body twisting and suspension in the air which climaxes the dance. During the Agheghele dance, the dancers are not allowed to fall or touch the ground because they are spirits and it is believed the spirits communicate to those who wear the mask. Instead of them falling to the ground, they are assisted by some initiates who aids them when they are almost falling.

The Okpodu (masquerade) maintains peace and orderliness during performance and at times, elicit the participation of the audience through the clapping of hands and chorusing of songs. The actors or characters in the dance do undergo special trainings. One of such trainings is the spiral movement of the elimhins which is done by turning the body towards the left.

Esan Igbabonelimhin apart from its entertainment purposes, also generates money for the community and the characters through performances in organized social functions like burial ceremonies. At any dance, spectacular performer often gets monetary rewards from an impressed audience.

Dramatic Potential

Drama as has been stated is an imitation of an action, which means something that has already been performed. However ritual or festive African drama may look they still possess rudimentary elements that make a dramatic piece.

According to J.P. Clark that:

“If drama means the elegant imitation of some action significant to a people, it this means the physical representation or the evocation of one poetic image or a complex of such representation or evocation are speech, music, ritual, songs as well as dance and mime-----there is drama plenty in Nigeria”.(224)

Against this backdrop, Esan ritual and festival dances are dramatic, since they possess the universal criteria or yardstick for evaluating drama. Esan Igbabonelinlim therefore, falls under the traditional drama.

Character:-The most important element of drama is the idea of enactment of representation through characters who imitate person and events, impersonation is a feature that is found in most ritual worship or ceremonies, and it is through the different types of characters that a dramatist talk in his play. Igbabonelinhim is dramatic because it's an imitation of an action performed by some supernatural power as discussed in the origin of Igbabonelinhim's in chapter two-the phenomenon of the hunter's experience with the spirits who are the originators of the dance.

The feature of impersonation is shown in the duty performed by the “Ohen elimhin” which is the overall head before the dance. The Ohen sacrifices he-goat and uses the blood of the goat to go round the heads of the dancer of appease the spirits and to wide off evil spirits before dancing. By this role he is acting as an intermediary between the physical work and the spiritual world. The part he plays in the ceremony is known as role change which makes ritual possible. This role which is perceived by the audience can be cut out and be substituted. This is because the role he plays at the ceremony is different from his role in real life.

Plot

According to Aristotle, is the arrangement of incidents from beginning to the end. In this arrangement, action should be developed into sequential order, with the unity of time and place and acting within this general framework we may still go further to isolate the essential aspect of conflict complication and finally denouement.

Plot in its classical meaning is not relevant to Igbabonelimhin dance. What exists as Igbabonelimhin is rudimentary in form. This can be divided into four parts. The opening glee, which is basically entry movement into the arena by both human characters and the “elimhins’ (actual dancers). This is followed by “Ojeke” and “Asono”, a stylistic dance which involves shaking of the body and demonstration with one's hands and gentle but calculated movement of legs to the beating of drums. The

Asono and Ojeke dance is followed by “Ugho”, a highly stylized dance than Ojeke and Asono and this followed the air which cleanses the dance.

Moreover, in between this linear order, elements of plot development are unconsciously introduced. This is suspense and surprise. Suspense comes in the time lapse between plot segments and surprise arises from the spectacular displays, such as body rolling, somersaulting etc. However, the plot has unity of time, place and action as Igbabonelimhin is performed within three hours.

Costume:- This is another feature of drama. It is the style of dress worn by the actors and it is a process of making clothes into costume. The major role of the costume in traditional festivals is esthetic which is to assure a pleasuring appeal.

Apart from these formalized dressing in the dance, less formalized dressing is also found in it. There is no clothing set aside for the leaders of the cult and the Asono and Ojeke dancers too. But in most cases, the Ohens (head of spirit) prefers to put on Igbulu a big wrapper tied across the shoulder, with a T.Shirt and trouser underneath. This is the mode of dressing used by the men in Ishan.

Costume is prominent feature in Igbabonelimhin dance. It is aesthetic and it carries a message across by letting the audience know at a glance, who and what characters represent.

Song, Music and Dance- Is another important element of drama.

Song- Is a medium of imitation, and it is a term whose sense, everyone understands and it is another dramatic element of Igbabonelimhin. It provides the impetus to the action and acts as a stimulant on the characters and spectators. Songs which have no much significance attached to them in terms of their sementas are lyrical and have rhythmic flow are often used. They are simple in from; which may originate from amongst the drummers or background chorus-songs are however heightened during performance with beating of drums.

Music- It is one of the most important features found in Igbabonelimhin Aristotle a Greek philosopher in his most influential essay on drama called poetics, identified music as one of the constituents of drama. It heightens the effect of the words allowing them to be rendered with the projection and position lacking in speech alone.

Music starts the action of Igbabonelimhin. No elimhin dances without music. Anakpe starts the music. At times took, it can start off with the hitting of Agogo with stick. However, Okegan as the most important of all Igbabonelimhin’s musical instrument, they all combine to create the rhythmic effect. There is a type of telegraphic message sent through the music to the dancers. This beating is such that it regulates the steps and movements of the dancers. Music have variety of song, yell, shrieking voices,

all these are dramatic expressions. The music can also change, depending on the style and advancement of Igbabonelimhin plot.

Dancing:- Is the action in drama. It is a primary characteristics of Igbabonelimhin dance. Dance is a visible expression which varies in form and tempo. It is a visible expression of rapport between rhythm and movement as well as manifestation of the mind whose farthest stretch is trance.

As we earlier explained in the plot sequence of Igbabonelimhin, there is the Ojeke, Ugho and Agheghele. Characters carry out these forms of dancing in three distinctive, formal and idiosyncratic ways. They twist their body, somersaults, bend and move their body steps in a very calculated way.

Audience

“A play is to be judged by its value to those who watch it not only the experience, but also the degree to which we recreate it is the measure of its worth.

The audience is very significant in the nature of Igbabonelimhin as drama. Their participation determine the nature of the dance and the manners characters dance. The characters openly play to the audience. The nature of the scenery is an open invitation the audience to participate and they participate in very many ways: they are involved in the creation and the recreation of any Igbabonelimhin dance by clapping and occasional. Out burst of feelings to unique styles displayed by the actors to the actual dancing itself.

. . M.J.C. Edneruo says that faith gives substance to ritual and because they have faith, their sacrifice is accepted by the spirits or gods. The people have faith and believe that whatever is asked is granted, that is why it is often performed each time they want to go far a dance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, according to African people, man lives in a religious universe, so that natural phenomena and objects are intimately associated with God. They not only originate from him but also bear witness to him. Man’s understanding of God is strongly coloured by the universe of which man is himself a part. Man sees in the universe not only the imprint but the reflection of God; and whether that image is married or clearly focused and defined, it is nevertheless an image of God and only image known in traditional African societies.

Modern concepts of drama was examine and elements. This foreshadowed the form of Esan Igbabonelimhin dance the form movement style and composition of the dance. This is the aesthetic use of the body to form different shapes in the course of the dance, thereby displaying the fluidity and suppleness of the dancer’s body like “feathers in the wind”.

Despite all the dramatic qualities in the African festivals, various African and European scholars have concluded that drama has never existed in African. Amongst such critics are M.M. Mahood, Echeró, Ruth Finnigan who tended to quoting the views to M.M. Mahood in Mahood's *Drama in Newborn state*. Characterized African festivals as "pre-drama". Also H.D. Albright and others, described drama to be plays that are written and performed. With Albright's view, It is incorrect to call Igbabonelimhin dance drama, because it is unwritten. In this same view, one can correctly term it as drama, since it is acted on arena stage.

However, one could conclude that igbabonelinhim is a form of art that has elements of drama as well as ritual. During the dance, dramatic elements feature prominently. These are songs, dances, costumes, dialogues, audience, character. All these going by the analysis of the previous analysis, show that they have dramatic potentials as well as limitations. Plot in the ceremony is not very prominent. This is because it never develops into conflict.

Ritual which is the last of the elements, has both dramatic potentials and limitations. The elders sacrificing to the spirits are regarded as collective protagonists because of their movements are co-ordinated and the characters are many. The limitations however, is that both elements of plot, characterization and dialogue are in rudimentary form. But they still contain some potential; they can be developed into drama proper. However ritual or festival African drama may look they still possess rudimentary elements that make a dramatic piece, no matter the cultural consideration.

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