THE EGHUGHU FESTIVAL OF ADUHANHAN PEOPLE OF EDO STATE AS A PARADIGM IN PERFORMANCE STUDIES

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Abstract

Modern advancements have had a diminishing influence on most traditional festivals and celebrations, thus engendering a paradigm shift of attention from the sacred-religious aspects to their social entertaining components. It is within this purview that this paper investigates Eghughu Festival of Aduhanhan people of Edo State and evaluates the performance components, concerning other social activities, and the role and significance of this festival in performative studies. Employing the framework of Performance Studies, the paper adopts a mixed-method approach and participatory observation of the festival, as the primary source of materials. The paper using Historical and Descriptive techniques however provides a historical overview of the Aduhanhan people and the Eghughu festival, as well as to describe the festival in process, respectively. The study, however, discovers that performative elements of space/setting, mimetics, dramatization, spectacles, plot, masking and, most importantly, traces of "restored behaviour" characterized the festival. Further evaluation reveals that the performative elements have gained prominence and attention because the sacred-religious components of the festival have been greatly affected by modern advancements (including Christianity). Consequent to this, the level of enjoyment or the 'aesthetic communitas' and the 'unspoken authority' given to the observer/audience to become active participants were salient features of Performance Studies inherent in the festival. The study

therefore concludes Eghughu Festival emerges as a paradigm that transcends its immediate cultural context, providing a rich tapestry for understanding the nuanced relationships between tradition, performance, and cultural identity in 21st-century Nigeria.

Keywords: Eghughu Festival, Paradigm, Performances Studies, Aduhanhan Tradition, Nigeria

Introduction

The traditional Nigerian societies continue to beam with ceremonies that are performative in nature and content. Although the celebratory modes of one ceremony might differ from other(s), there is nonetheless the motif of trying to bridge the gap between the human and spiritual realms to attract supernatural and spiritual 'favour'. This helps to foreclose the fact that the majority of the ceremonies, especially the festivals, tie their origin to religious rituals.

The African-cum-Nigerian worldview is a highly spiritual and religious one, and to connect the human realm with the spiritual requires a series of propitiations. With specific reference to festival celebrations, Asagba (12) observes that a festival occasion not only creates a forum for the people to worship and socialize with their gods and ancestors but also an atmosphere for social harmony. Majority of the festivals, no doubt, emerged out of religious necessities with social entertainment recipes attached. However, and painfully too, arising from the influence of modernity and secularization, much of the religious components are being subsumed in obscurantism, with the cultural and socialentertaining components gaining prominence.s

In addition, the introduction and invention of new technologies sometimes, subtly or radically, change the ritual in such religious festivals. Electricity and electric lighting, video cameras/phones, microphones and, more recently, the internet have all resulted in changes in the performance of religious rituals in

festivals in general. The result is that some festivals, such as the Eghughu festival of the Aduhanhan people of Edo state have become subject to being examined as a paradigm in performance studies, especially as the intellectually collaborative effort between Richard Schechner and Victor Turner has engendered a fresh frontier in the theatre, seeking to ascertain just what human activities, and to what extent, can be studied as performance.

The Aduhanhan World-View

As an enclave of the Benin kingdom, with allegiance to the palace and Oba of Benin, the Aduhanhan worldview is akin to that of the general Benin people. The totality of the people's view of existence and perception of life, in general, is hinged on the concept of Theism, which is the belief in the existence of both Osanoghodua (God Almighty) and Enikaro (other gods) who are ancestors. Thus the cultural, religious, social and even political ways of life are built around, and moderated by, this belief system.

Religiously, the people are fused by communal as well as individual personal gods, to whom propitiations are made for favour, protection, outpour of blessings and many more. These personal and communal gods thus become the bridge or block between man and his creator, God. If man is to be in good stead with his creator God, he must first be in good stead with his god by eschewing acts that will sever good relationships. Akponome and Olisaeke (86) acquiesce to this when they state:

> The traditional African man believes in the existence of beings whose wishes he must conform to and whose existence he must emulate. In other words, he believes that his existence in the world has spiritual implications which are linked, to some forces that determine the essence of his life, and as such cannot afford to ignore them.

It is on the above premise that the average Aduhanhan indigene chose to embrace the Eghughu festival celebration, which

emerged out of religious worship, as the greatest and surest way of individually and collectively propitiating the gods. This, thus, helps to foreclose that since festival celebrations serve diverse purposes, they are consequently viewed from different perspectives by scholars.

Conceptualising Traditional African Festival

Several scholars have written on the meaning and purposes of traditional festivals used here to mean festivals rooted in the people's culture ab initio. Thus, a festival becomes an event by a given community, centring on or celebrating some unique occurrences or symbols (human or spiritual). Such celebration becomes a period for renewal and fortification by the people through religious rituals sometimes with entertaining components. Echeruo (26), Amankulor (18), Clark (74), Olatunji (36), among others x-rayed traditional festivals from their religious and ritual perspectives. To them, since the festival is a period of worship of the gods through all manner of propitiations, its sacredness can never be undermined. On the other hand, Da Sylva (76), Omosule (20), Akuso (65), and Odobo (37), regard festivals as drama. To them, despite the sacred religious components of a festival, the entertaining recipes take the fore. Asagba (114) sums it up that "in the assessment of the Performing Arts in Nigeria, and indeed Africa as a whole, a good point to begin from is the appreciation of the traditional festival celebration which is the bedrock and prime artistic institution in Nigeria"

Most communities in Nigeria, including Edo state, have rich folklore, myths, history and accounts of legends, heroes, and deities who either brought them into the limelight or saved them in times of peril. Thus, on festival occasions, the people re-enact stories or incidents to commemorate such happenings. Although such re-enactment could also be in worship of personal or communal gods and a reaffirmation of the people's commitment and continuous

loyalty both in social and religious terms, they are nonetheless often accompanied by dramatic elements.

Hinged on the above premise, therefore, this paper agrees first, that although most Traditional African festivals are religiously inclined with performative recipes, modernity and secularization have however tended to alter the narrative thus subjecting most of the festivals to a re-evaluation. Secondly, and more importantly, the paper posits that the performative recipes of traditional festivals should be the baseline for Performance Studies, for it is through traditional festivals that the social, religious, traditional, economic, and political components of societies can be cross-culturally studied.

Performance Studies as an Emergent Discourse

Performance Studies as an offshoot of the intellectual collaboration between Richard Schechner and Victor Turner (Phelan 4) stresses the importance of intercultural performance as an alternative to traditional proscenium theatre. It raises the question of, outside of the confines of the conventional stage, what other human activities qualify or can be studied as performance. It is given this that Performance Studies explores a wide array of subjects, especially as cultures are always interacting, yet profoundly different such that no theory of performance is universal; one size does not fit all. The emphasis of Performance Studies therefore is on inquiring about the “behavior” of culture as either distinct from or similar to another, a phenomenon that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (28) refers to as “Liveness". It is this behaviour or liveness that regulates the total concept and features of Performance Studies.

If the behaviour (action) of liveness is to receive the acceptance of the people, it must first satisfy their aesthetic communalism. By aesthetic communalism, it is meant that the value, judgment, or attitude, or experience attached to such action must be a common feature to the people. Aesthetic, too, implies beauty (what is

beautiful) from the perspective of the individual or a collectivity of individuals. Beauty, too, is a symbol of morality, and the enjoyment of nature is the mark of a good soul. Therefore, the festival in question is primarily judged as a performance from the point of view of its aesthetic appeal because performance itself is the total of the essential and analytical perception of the object and phenomenon that constitute it. The level of enjoyment generated and audience involvement becomes a reflection of the aesthetic value and appeal of the festival performance.

The concept of liveness, as another major requisite of Performance Studies, infers that the action is not of text or script or other forms of abstractions, but of real life, of man in his natural state of being. It settles the pondering on the relationship between daily life, the theatre and the real-real. In other words, it tries to distinguish between appearance and reality, or fact and makebelieve. The concept of liveness helps to underline the importance of action to a performance. Festival celebration, as a performance, is akin to performing in everyday life because both are a continuum, and the liveness in such behaviour indicates further that the more self-conscious a person is, or the more he constructs behaviour for those watching or listening or doing both, the more such behaviour is performing. Lending his voice to the concept of liveness, Schechner (28) opines that people just live life in a pattern of restored behaviour. And by "Restored Behavior", Schechner meant that all behaviour consists of recombining bits of previously behaved behaviours or actions marked off by aesthetic convention that varies from culture to culture. The ritual components of the festival exemplify this viewpoint by Schechner. For instance, what would make a typical Benin man enjoy the "Igue " festival or an Ibo man enjoy the New Yam festival more than the sedate atmosphere of a play by William Shakespeare, for example, is the aesthetic dimension, foremost.

The Eghughu Festival in Perspective

The Eghughu festival of the Aduhanhan people of Edo state emerged from the religious cleansing worship of the Eghughu deity. When the very first set of settlers in the present location of the community was affected by mysterious measles and chickenpox, one of the founders paid a visit to his maternal homestead from where he brought the Eghughu idol. The items of worship of the idol and for cleansing in times of affliction are simply the Eghughu effigy, palm fronds, squirrel cane, and a small earthen pot containing mixed concoctions. The efficacy that accompanied the cleansing and healing exercise, at that time, attracted a lot of people to worship the idol. Although the worship began more as a religious exercise over time, the social and cultural aspects engendered more attention, attraction and followership. The eventual outcome is the Eghughu festival, which is celebrated annually by the people.



Fig 1: The Eghughu Totem

During the Eghughu festival, lots of theatrical activities take place, meanwhile, prior to its commencement, personal and

communal cleaning and cleansing are undertaken. On the fifth day of the festival, a day usually deliberately chosen to fall on "Eken" day, the different age/guild/cult groups take turns performing at the palace/village square. Beginning with the children up to elderly males, each group presents seven representatives as major performers while others become observer participants. The costume is predominantly black, while squirrel cane (Uwẹn rien ọ tan), Palm fronds (Omẹ) and or occupational implements constitute the major props. Each group is expected to perform for about 30 minutes and a performance is adjudged "good" if it adheres to a pristine way of doing it.





Fig 2: The "Ẹghele" (Elders) Fig 3:
A Representative of the Hunters Guild

Age Grade on Display

The major highlight of the festival is the appearance of the Eghughu masquerades which is usually slated for the 9th day of

the festival, also on Eken day. When the masquerades first emerge from the secret groove, where they have been receiving fortifications, they head straight to the palace shrine to perform for selected elders and the Chief Priest before performing for the general audience. Their costumes consist primarily of heavy padding from palm fronds; colourful head masks; ankle rattlers; and small mirrors, all of which are symbolic. Their performance is usually like a communal affair because everyone presents replicates the dramatization, dance steps, mimetics, and even choruses to songs of the masquerades in spontaneity. This performance is also followed by a similar one in honour of the Ọdion o were (Village Head). At this performance, all the males, aside from the Masquerades, are dressed in similarly coloured attire as the 'omẹ'(lemon green) to reflect the importance of the omẹ to the festival from its inception. Everyone also holds a strand of the omẹ with which they pray and drop at the marked circle in the middle of the performance arena. These strands are gathered the following morning and taken to the village shrine to be burnt as atonement and means of propitiation.



Fig 4: The Lead Eghughu Masquerade



Fig 5: Some other Masquerades making their entrance to the arena.

The next performance is in honour of the women and it is held at the compound of the "Iye-evbo" (Mother of all/land) who is also the oldest woman in the community. The high point of this segment is usually performance by seven different women who come forth to enact seven different important duties of women in the community; settlement of disputes and a brisk performance by the Iye-evbo, not minding her age and frailty.

Finally, the festival is concluded with a carnival-like procession where all the different groups engage each other in acrobatics, instrumentation, costume parade and many more. They move around the community and as they move more people are attracted to join the train. While the procession is going on, the seven masquerades return to the village shrine for a cleansing ritual at night before returning to their respective homes the following morning, to mark the end of the festival.

Form and Performance Studies Features in Eghughu Festival

This paper examines and highlights the performative features of the Eghughu festival of the Aduhanhan people of Edo state and proposes it as a benchmark for Performance Studies. Several literatures claim that the African continent in general, and Nigeria in particular, had long developed performance elements that are akin to the Western-type theatre in their different celebrations, including festivals. While some writers assess festivals from the sacred-religious perspective, others are concerned with the social-entertaining components, while some others see festivals as drama or theatrical performances.

However, despite the avalanche of literature on festivals, whether as religious rituals, or dramatic performances, the features of Performance Study, as an emergent discourse, inherent in festivals have been relatively under-sighted. Efforts are made in this paper to cover this gap.

All the activities involved in Eghughu festival are geared toward touching or reaching the aesthetic consciousness of the people (onlookers) who soon become active observer-participants. The actions are framed, heightened and displayed in spontaneity. Artistic talents, whether in music, craft, dance, or embroidery, are displayed. Stories have it that by providing music and songs at the Eghughu festival occasions, youths have emerged in the music industry earning a living from it. Some have also found worthy spouses during the festivals.

i. Eghughu Festival and the Concept of Live-ness

The first feature of Performance Studies inherent in Eghughu festival is the "live-ness" of the events. Unlike in conventional performing (on a conventional stage) where the performers carry out prescribed actions, predetermined through rehearsals, Performance Studies, examine those actions of man that are not

subjected to laid down routines and regulations, yet they are performances geared toward achieving a result. In the religiousritual aspects of the Eghughu festival, there are codified behaviours that are not subjected to the discretion or creative ingenuity of the performer, whereas the social aspects approve of all and any form of innovations to the performance process. This is in line with the submission of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett that live-ness, as a prerequisite in Performance Studies, is not of text or script or other forms of abstractors, but of real life, of man in his natural state of being. Whatever action that is being carried out in Eghughu festival portrays man in his free natural state of being. The cross-cultural link of live-ness is the focus of Performance Studies. In Eghughu festival everybody, whether the designated performers or the supposed audience, carries out their live actions in tandem with the festival scenario with no form of barrier just like all other facets of human endeavours and activities.

ii. Eghughu Festival: A Collage of Human Endeavours

As an interdisciplinary field that seeks the connectedness of cultures, the concept of Performance Studies cuts across all aspects of human endeavour, be it business, politics, sport, social or even academics. Every one of these sectors seeks to attain a desired level of performance. The proposal or submission, here, therefore, is that the Eghughu festival, just like the Theatre, provides an opportunity for a gathering or meeting of people from all these different sectors just for performance. The major difference, however, is that the Eghughu festival performance which is akin to all human endeavours is spontaneous, real-time and devoid of the stereotypic format or pattern of 'doing' that characterizes the Theatre performance. This is in line with the position or opinion of Schechner (14) corroborated by Kratz (36) and Austin (47) that Performance Studies look at performance from multiple performative purviews.

At this collage of different spheres of humans, the belief systems of the people and their ways of life, as well as human action

are further heightened. This human action, according to Phelan (52) is a major feature of Performance Studies that needs to be examined cross-culturally. In addition, all the different spheres of life perform in line with what each particular sphere requires. That is, they perform or do what they do in real life during the festival celebration. This could be attributed to the claim that a festival celebration, as x-rayed in Performance Studies, cannot be performed as a single-line thread of action, rather it is coordinated by varied theatrical accompaniments, all of which are a reflection of the lifestyle of the people.

iii. Eghughu Festival in the Concept of Aesthetics and Observer-Participants

The overall aesthetic function of the festival is in the integration of the various elements of music, dance, song, rhythm and spectacle with all the shades of performing art geared towards replicating the real-life action to stimulate the celebration. In real life, music seems to be an aid in inducing moods of tranquillity, nostalgia, sentiments, group rapport, religious feeling, party solidarity and patriotism. These are precisely some of the actions of man that Performance Studies would cross-culturally consider in the concept of aesthetic communality.

Watching the festival performance live, as it happens, just as the real-life events occur, adds to its aesthetic appreciation and assimilation because the audience of on-lookers in some cases are deeply involved and they augment the performance or provide commensurate responses. This is one major hallmark of Performance Studies; it seeks to separate make-believe from the real.

Modern advancement in technology has made it possible for people to sit in the comfort of their homes and watch live or recorded coverages of festival celebrations. Luckily, the Eghughu festival, despite this blatant intrusion of modernity, is still able to attract a large collection of people who prefer the face-to-face aspect of the performance, picking up even very minute aspects of

the aesthetic attractions in the process. Performance Studies has been observed to also use modern technology. This appears to be a blessing in disguise to festival celebrations because it can be a way of further helping to popularize traditional festivals. For instance, when Performance Studies employs modern technology like CCTV and the internet, more people will become aware of the festival and its celebratory mode. Besides that, even though Western civilization, education, technology and religion have had huge effects on the Eghughu festival, the performance quality and mode of celebration that warranted its choice as a paradigm in Performance Studies has remained unabated. Modernity has also brought in some form of sophistication. Aduhanhan youths in the Diaspora, for instance, have also fashioned ways of reaching one another to initiate fresh ideas that make the festival more colourful and aesthetically appealing, cross-culturally matching such appeal.

The concept of observer-participants is an indispensable tool in the discourse of Performance Studies just as it is in traditional African Theatre. The focus of Performance Studies is on the action of man in his real or natural state of being. Agreed that the audience is pivotal to every performance, but when the audience also becomes active participants, as we observed in Eghughu festival and traditional African Theatre in general, the interest of Performance Studies in festival celebration becomes further justified and heightened. Above all, the level of "enjoyment", vis-à-vis the "aesthetic pull", manifests not only the performers but also in the audience who break the bounds to become active participants from time to time.

Conclusion

In acting or playing out their 'real-real' in their state of naturalness, people help to heighten the performance process as well as help to justify the claim by Phelan (4) that Performance Studies is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon. Rather, performance occurs in several, if not all, human activities or endeavours, which need to be cross-culturally examined. The dance session in Eghughu festival,

for instance, is a reflection of the life experience of the people, expressed through the created forms and symbols of movements which provide aesthetic satisfaction that binds the people together just as in their social state of being.

The tonal rendition, voice modulation, facial expressions, gestures and movements are all contrived to suit the mood of the festival and heighten the aesthetic attraction derived therefrom. This is even in connection with one of the decisive qualities of the post-modernist theory that the performance principle is applied to all aspects of social and artistic life. The performances by everyone in the Eghughu festival are all geared, willy-nilly, towards conforming to the performance principles. In addition to this, the actions in the Eghughu festival are usually framed and displayed, just as Schechner (2) posits in his theory of Performance Studies that there is no fixable limit to what is or is not performance and that what is important is that there is an "action" which is framed, prescribed, heightened and displayed. Watching the performance live, as it happens, adds to its aesthetic appeal because the audience who, sooner or later, become participants themselves, are deeply involved and they augment the performance by joining the singing or dancing of the performers. This is inextricably linked to all human actions, all of which are presumed to have attributes of performance to be subjected to study.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and submissions made so far, this paper makes the following recommendations:

1. The festival occasion has been proven to be the foremost human gathering that encapsulates the features of Performance Studies, but there is the need to carry out further research on other human gatherings to detect the Performance Studies features in them.
2. In furtherance of the above, it is also recommended that "Performance Studies", as a course, be introduced into the curricular base of Theatre Arts and its allied departments.

3. A conscious effort should be channelled towards eliminating the hitherto gap between the theatre performance/performer and the audience. This is because the cardinal objective of drama and theatre (veering towards

"performance") is not to create passivity but to spur the audience into a correlative response that will in turn make drama (performance) more accessible and as a more potent instrument or agent of change.

4. Society is getting more advanced in technology; the internet has made the globe even smaller; with CCTV cameras, for instance, small or "hidden" acts can be made bare. This portends both good and bad performances. (including festivals) The good side, relative to festivals and other performances, is that with this advancement there is a better way of documenting and preserving festival modes. The bad side is that with such development, there is a huge threat to audience-cum-participation, thus requiring a refocus of attention to exploring the performance potentials in other human activities.

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