

CULTURE IN A DYNAMIC SOCIETY: A DIALOGIC ASSESSMENT OF IBIBIO MASQUERADES IN THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGY

AKWANG, ETOP Ph.D

Abstract

Modernity is very attractive. In spite of our sometimes parochial defence of primordial primitive cultural practices, we still do always admit the superiority of modern technologies and the culture they proliferate. Ibibio masquerade theatre cannot shy away from the advantages that the new technologies of cultural representation offer. It can only negotiate with them. This is thrust of our essay.

Introduction

The direction of our essay is to assess the ways in which Ibibio theatre, as a field of cultural practice, can orchestrate the continuity of Ibibio culture and tradition through a negotiation with emergent media of communication and their technologies of representation. Our concept of the media derives from Elsmer N. Muller and T. Spangenberg's definition, namely, as "the technological communication media of the twentieth century" (108). This would include television, radio, and film. Our view of what is media also admits of an older horizon of the concept occupied by theatre. Presently, radio, film and television have fulfilled central communicative functions that raise suggestions about the redundancy of the other media of socio-cultural signification such as the novel and the newspaper that rely on literacy, that is, the ability to read and write.

The "medialization" of the theatre lies in its contextual interventions, immediacy and intermediacy as the communicator of meanings between the actor or performance or both, and their audience or, the public as a whole. According to Martin Esslin, "a dramatic performance must, at the most basic level, be regarded as essentially a process by which information about the actions that are to be mimetically reproduced is conveyed to the audience" (16). The meanings generated are made possible by the activities of many artists and technicians who employ what Jon Whitmore calls "multiple communication systems" (4). These systems include, according to Whitmore:

- a) Primary Systems linguistic (language), visual and aural systems.
- b) Secondary Systems olfactory and tactile systems (4).

Exploiting the communicative possibilities inherent in "semiotization", both directors and performers can manipulate these systems "in order to activate a full range of communicative mechanism during performance" (Whitmore, 4).

It is definite, from the foregoing, that the primary utilitarian benefits of the media - radio, television, film and the theatre - to any society are in the articulation, manipulation and communication of social events and

experiences to the profit of that society. Usually, their domain of concerns is as elastic as it is inexhaustible music, the fine arts, sports, burial, elections, marriages, commerce, industry and business; education, urbanization, development programmes and initiatives, war, diplomacy and politics, fashion, anthropology, ethnology, technology, etc. Ibibio theatre participates in all these processes and activities.

Yet there are real and perceptual differences between the electronic media radio, television, and film; and the live theatre which Ibibio masquerade theatre exemplifies. The electronic media reaches a vast audience while the theatre as a form of media has access only to a limited audience and, therefore, susceptible to a limited practice. Yahaya Abubakar says that the all encompassing and the ever widening spheres of influence of the electronic media derives from its form which allows it to “reach millions of people simultaneously and with immediacy and have profound effect on the attitudes and behaviour of people” (183). This is basically the question of their performance. According to Herb Zettel, the electronic media of which we speak does not “represent a cheap, efficient and accessible distribution device for messages. On the contrary, the media have a great influence on the shaping of the message....They are integral part of the total communication process, not just the channel by which the communication is sent” (10).

The overriding impulse of this paper is that Ibibio masquerade theatre in its present constitution and ideology, as both media and message, does not exist alone. It is presently circumscribed by myriads of other theatrical forms both foreign and indigenous that clamour for attention and adoption. Moreover, the Ibibio society that gave it body, form and legitimacy has come within the secure stranglehold of a modernism nestled on Judeo - Christian humanism, and the ideals/structures of liberal democracy. In addition, many of these opportunistic, performative and entertainment cultures deploy superior technologies of self-representation based on the integration of systems appropriate for the dissemination of mass culture. Since she cannot cram these other rival cultures out, without appearing xenophobic, a convenient logic is to negotiate new spaces for itself through dialogue with these insurgent meta-theatrical products.

This is the context in which we refer to the Ibibio society as a dynamic society a society which, through sheer strength of will and force of vision, discards and/or modifies old thoughts, ideas, methods, tools, and artefacts in favour of the “new”. The new may be an accommodation, a fusion of old and new forms, or a transcendence of the old. For the word “DYNAMIC” has been defined by The Chambers Dictionary (1983 Edition) as “relating to force, to activity or things in movement, relating to dynamism, relating to a moving force, any driving force instrumental in growth or change.” To our mind no society appears totally insulated from the insurgency of change, otherwise it would be stale and static. Colin Counsell submits that “society is an ongoing process in which all parts interact and determine one another. Society comprises a number of different forces or 'moments' which are in contradiction, pulling the social whole in different directions, pushing towards different outcomes” (80). These processes can be called processes of rationalization and/or modernization. It can also be called processes of homogenization.

Ibibio society in South-South Nigeria befits the nomenclature of being dynamic through transformation from its pre-colonial cultures and traditions, to those of colonial and, presently, post colonial cultures. These historical processes proved quite abrasive to our indigenous culture and tradition through their fund of sanctions and prohibitions, and through the unwholesome replacement of indigenous values with the European's. Colonial rule, for example, sponsored an unhealthy decapitation of indigenous culture and traditions. Schools, churches, courts, European quarters, club houses, and administrative units were introduced as institutions deliberately established to both confront and destabilize indigenous cultures and traditions. Unimaginable reprisals awaited natives who patronized their local cultural practices. In addition, Ibibio are a co constituent of an autonomous state called the Akwa Ibom State, with a democratically elected government that replaces the quasi-chiefdom of its indigenous communities that provided both moral and political support for the perpetration of the Ibibio masquerade traditions.

Ibibio Masquerade Theatre

Ibibio theatre is a kind of traditional African theatre which Yemi Ogunbiyi defines as: "an indigenous cultural institution, a form of art nurtured on the African soil over the centuries and which has, therefore, developed distinctive features and whose techniques are sometimes totally different from the borrowed form now practiced by many of our contemporary artists" (4). The most visible and the most ubiquitous forms of Ibibio traditional theatre are embodied in its robust masquerade tradition. A profuse body of researches by renown scholars, anthropologists and dramatists already exists on Ibibio masquerade theatre and drama. Some of them include G. I. Jones, John Messenger, Ruth Finnegan, Amoury Tailbot; Yemi Ogunbiyi, Inih Ebong, Uko Akpaide, Ntienyong Udo Akpan, etc. According to tentative categories devised by Inih Ebong, Ibibio masquerades integrate:

- (i) animated wooden puppets that use gesture and speech known as Utuere Ekpe (Spider play) and or Ekpo Akpara, and Okokot Uba. Their performance space known as 'akpara' (meaning enclosure) is a collapsible, mobile, rectangular fence masked with raffia, palm fronds, and heavy, colourful clothes.
- (ii) a massive, pyramidal, wooden enclosure covered with thick, bright clothes, raffia, and palm fronds known as Akata. It has a carved wooden mask usually placed at the peak of the triangle. It also has a guttural speech. Its diminutive version is known as Ekpri (meaning small or junior) Akata.
- (iii) life-size masquerades without face but, rather, draped with dry plantain, raffia or fresh palm fronds up to their knees or (as the case may be) ankles. They are known as Uye, Adiaha Anwa, Inuen or Idem Udo (as the case may be).
- (iv) body and facial decoration using chalks and paints of various colours to accentuate and excite fear. It is known as Mbre Okoko (or Okoko performance).

- (v) facial mask (wooden, paper or cloth) carved or moulded to tell a story, delineate gender, status, and temperament of the masquerade. Its paraphernalia include raffia, ragged folk clothing, stilts, a wooden phallus, feather, bells and knives, black chalk or charcoal and palm frond as in Ekpo Nyoho, Okpo Ekoon (male) Eka Ekoon (female) masquerades, Idip Akpan Adiana, Ntok Odiodio), Ekpo Ntok, Obio Okpo, and Udo Edem Eko etc.
- (vi) carved headpiece decorated with clothes, mirrors, female hairdo, or crocodile or tortoise or any other cosmological motif. It represents Ibibio/Annang marine 'force vitale'.
- (vii) facial and body adornments with a headpiece especially in female and maidenhood cult performance such as Abang, Ebre, Asian Uboikpa and Nyok. The headpiece is usually the prerogative of the pivotal dancer.
- (viii) Carved facial mask with high, vertical, headpiece and everyday cloths known as Ibom.
- (ix) Woven or embroidered raffia hood reaching from head to toe. It is used in Ekpe and Obon performances (5).

Each of these multiform represents a means of expressing the moral, religious, social, psychological and philosophical conditioning of the Ibibio mind and conscience. An experiencing of them gives a vivid portraiture of the Ibibio theatre culture.

Critical Challenges

As a product of Ibibio indigenous culture, Ibibio masquerade theatre faces the danger of untimely extinction if it does not readdress itself to the settling influence of foreign entertainments that have already seduced many of its adherents as contemporary Ibibio society is wholesomely awash with Euro-American lifestyles, cultures, and technologies. This new society is, here, referred to as 'a dynamic society.' These foreign cultural ethos are usually beamed through sophisticated systems of electronic communication radio, television, films. Through them, European modes of dressing, dancing, eating, singing, acting on stage, technologies and scientific developments, electronics, sports, games, etc., make their impressions on the psyche of Ibibio men and women, with a real danger of having the Ibibio endorse European ethos and panaceas in disdain of their culture and tradition.

By culture we contemplate Seyla Benhabib's definition of the concept as 'those values, shared systems of meaning, signification and symbolization of a people usually considered as a homogenous unity" (11). These mark culture out as something experienced and valued by a homogenous unit and bear its individuality. A contrastive concept to that of culture is 'civilization' which Benhabib defines as "those material values and practices that are shared with other peoples, and that do not reflect, therefore, individuality" (11). Civilization is always the product of the bourgeois, industrial capitalist world characterized by synchronization, systems integration, mass production and standardization. The rules governing business practices, legal practices, and the operations of liberal democracy and modern diplomacy all inhabit the heartland of civilization, as opposed to culture.

The various genres of Ibibio masquerade listed previously belong to the category of cultural production while foreign cultural forms belong to the category of civilization. This is because what Benhabib calls the intrinsic distinguishing marks of culture “interiority, depth, organic growth and collectivism”, are reflected in the practice of Ibibio masquerades. Foreign cultural programmes, on the other hand, are known by the distinguishing marks of civilization such as “exteriority, superficiality, linear construction in time and space, and individualism.” (12). Civilization gives rise to mass culture defined by Benhabib as:

The totality of those systems of signification, representation, symbolization, and those social practices that have quasi-autonomous logic and independence separated often from the intentionality or spirituality of those who constitute them. In structuralist and post-structuralist thought in particular, the step towards eliminating the subject of culture is taken all too frequently (12).

Mass culture is entertainment-oriented; it rests on the pivots of loosely contrived commoditized pleasures that are mostly electronically disseminated such as the promotion of Hollywood films which their “star” figures exemplify. Another name for mass culture is “popular culture.” It integrates, tentatively, media images, television shows, “pop” (short for popular) music-disco, reggae, rhythm and blues, rap, i.e. Hip-Hop, makossa, calypso, and the mode of speech, dressing and mannerism they inspire; photography, carnivals, disco-dancing, disc jockeying, hocking, night clubs and theatre houses, cartoon animation, sports and games, electronic advertising, and even the newspapers, broadcasting, jugglery, tourism, etc. This kind of culture is also marked by superficiality, homogeneity, lack of durability, reproducibility, and lack originality.

Strategies of Dialogue

The question that arises from the foregoing is: what strategies of dialogues can the Ibibio masquerade theatre adopt to ensure its survival in the face of its constantly being assailed by rival foreign alternatives? A cardinal praxis of a dialogic social process, following Mikhail Bakhtin, hints at what Imoh Emenyi calls “the interaction among numerous voices in the society which is from the standpoint of conflict, [which imbues] the 'unofficial' or ordinary language with multiplicity of meanings” (Intersection, 16). Thus dialogism engages authoritarian discourses and utterances and subscribes to an interaction of voices since it rests on the laurels of inter-textual concerts. According to Bakhtin: Any utterance, in addition to its own theme, always responds (in the broad sense of the word) in one form or another to others' utterances.... The speaker is not Adam, and therefore the subject of his speech itself inevitably becomes the arena where his opinions meet those of his partners (in a conversation or dispute about some everyday event) or other viewpoints, worldviews, trends, theories, and so forth (in the sphere of cultural communication) (94).

What corresponds to an 'authoritarian discourse' and 'Adam' in this case is the Ibibio masquerade and its traditions which, many say, is sacred and need not be modernized. This makes it into some transcendental signified that is at once inviolable within the culture. "Others' utterances" which Ibibio masquerade must respond to are the foreign performative products and their technologies of popular dissemination. It cannot pretend that they are not in existence, or influential, when they have become the choice products of leisure and entertainment among the Ibibio already. For, what constitutes the dominant temperament in post modern appraisal of human epistemology is the valorising of what Emenyi, following Bakhtin, describes as "the multiplicity and connectedness of human experiences across genres, groups, generations and epochs." (Sisterhood and Power, 60) Thus, in attempting to re-position themselves, Ibibio masquerades should borrow foreign influences and incorporate them to broaden their range of experimentation, popularization and participation. This kind of dialogue is envisaged if Ibibio masquerade theatre must dispense with its limited scope of time and space of production and presentation.

It must adopt both the spaces and strategies inherent in modern modes of electronic dissemination. In Vivian Sobchack's view:

It is not exaggeration to claim that none of us can escape daily encounters both direct and indirect with the objective phenomena of motion picture, television, and computer technologies and the networks of communication and the texts they produce. Nor is it an extravagance to suggest that, in the most profound, socially pervasive, and yet personal way, these objective encounters transform us as subjects (83).

For as Evans Ellert does assert: "The process of change and development into a new technological age is inescapable and necessary" (Williams, 66). Following Herb Zettl's submission that the electronic media are not "merely a cheap, efficient, and accessible distribution device for ready-made messages" but, "on the contrary, have influence on the shaping of the message" (10). Products of Ibibio masquerade theatre should be adapted to suit international audiences that consume these products electronically from vast distances and cultures. Other national cultures in Nigeria are already taking such steps to preserve their cultural products. For instance, Bim Mason compliments Peter Badejo's report on how Yoruba dances in Nigeria are adapted to suit international audiences (15). Badejo's report shows that in Yoruba land in Nigeria "the rich tradition of religious theatre is gradually being adapted to suit the requirements of the average tourist" (16). Badejo records that Yoruba traditional dances are undergoing what he calls "the gradual change or transformation from what existed as ritual and religious functions into becoming entertaining curiosities" (Mason, 16). In short, Ibibio masquerade theatre must take the challenge of transforming itself from being a 'closed' product earmarked only for local consumption within the Ibibio culture, to becoming a product of mass culture and exposed to the market forces.

How may these be done? How can Ibibio masquerade theatre culture participate in or aid development. Characteristically, it could do this through adaptation, through acculturation, and through appropriation.

Adaptation: This is the fact, act or process by which anything is subject to conditions of alteration, adjustment and modification, and transformation (or translation) before adoption. For example, many of the dances and their instrumental accompaniments performed by most cultural troupes in Nigeria today are adapted from their previous traditional enclaves and settings. No contemporary Nigerian choreographer can claim to be solely responsible for the present state of bata, ekombi, koroso, moninkim, udje or mbopo dances and sketches which are used to entertain and excite local and international audiences. As Eugenio Barba has noted concerning the Kathakali actor in oriental theatre, the contemporary Nigerian dancer in these troupes:

is immersed in a tradition that he must wholly respect. He is merely executing a role whose minute detail has, as in a musical score, been elaborated by some master in a more or less distant past. As with a pianist or a classical ballet dancer, his evolution cannot be separated from virtuosity (Hexley and Witts, 38).

The turn and twist, and steps of these dances belong to their tribal heritage, whereas their patterning in spacetime (proxemics and kinesics) belongs to modernity. What constitutes adaptation here is that, they are culled from shrines and groves of deities, town squares, and the annals of tribal festivals (or festivities). Thereafter, they are evacuated of their local usage and patterning, and placed on the push-button scaffolds of the modern stage. The dances are also commoditized, submitted to the tyranny of profit and market forces especially when put to touristic uses. Ibibio masquerade performances must market themselves as a mass-produced consumer product.

Equally, many Nigerian musicians have adapted their themes and inspiration from local, mythopoeic structures of legends and folktales. Udo Abianga and Inyang Nta Henshaw are some of them. Modern playwrights such as Basse Ubong and Femi Osofisan have also used popular myths and folklores to procure a beatific vision of the sublime in their plays *Esemsem* and *Morountodun* respectively. Others like Rotimi and Soyinka have adapted history. Many 'five star' hotels the pride of today's cosmopolitan tourism have adapted thatched huts as out-houses for barbecues and snacks. Many radio and television stations have adapted popular tribal tunes and music produced with local musical equipment as their signature tunes. One such example is the NTA Channel 12, Uyo, that opens her news bulletin with a popular folktale song rendered with ikon (an Ibibio local xylophone). Many families and hotels use the face of ancestral masks such as ekpo and ekoon to decorate their interior spaces.

Acculturation: This is the process or result of assimilating, through continuous contacts, features, customs, belief, etc., of another culture. Many contemporary performance idioms and nuances in Nigeria are standardized or patterned for the convenience of the proscenium stage. Stage lighting, plastic and adaptable sceneries, are responses to acculturation. Udo Marian, a youthful Ibibio music and dance maestro, uses his local ensemble to render popular European, American and African musical tunes such as Nico Mbarga's 'Sweet Mother', Michael Jackson's 'Thriller', Bob Marley's 'One Love', and current or topical evangelical songs.

Many of our local Ibibio songs, especially church songs, are popular with the Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa and other ethnic groups. Right now, the dominant mode of dancing in most Pentecostal churches today is the Udje of the Urhobo characterized by strong fast energetic movement of soft pliant bodies and nimble feet amidst a committed flying of white handkerchief. Echeruo (357-358) has noted how traditional dances, music and songs which the early missionaries and colonialists disdained found a compelling presence in emergent African churches. He has noted how the protestant mission in West Africa "tried here and there to include an item or two of West African life in their Christian teaching ... An unexpected development for the missions...was the extent of the demand for local themes and a local approach in many matters including concerts." This is the hallmark of acculturation. Perhaps, it is in this regard Fatuyi (167) remarked that: "Cultural contact and interaction permit learning and understanding, which may result in a change of behaviour or new ways of life. During such contacts revolutionary tendencies are bound to occur. Culture contact transforms culture."

Appropriation: This means to take to oneself what belongs to another for ones personal use. Appropriation is one of the ways of integrating outside or foreign influences without referring to them. Appropriation is looking for new ideas, techniques, and technology that can be integrated into the local or pre-existing ones. It does not mean that the appropriated technology and culture would be used just the same way as it is being used in the originating country or society.

For example, the video-film in West Africa is not used for the same purpose as those in Europe. There (Europe/America), it is used to miniaturize the representational products of the large screen for easy, mass domestic distribution and consumption. It is also used for demonstrations by specialized organizations such as detective outfits and megalithic industrial corporations, the police and the armed forces. It is usually the marginal format in those places. But, in West Africa, in the last two decades, the video-film has taken centre-stage as the overriding or mainstream representational device for both film production and distribution.

Other examples of appropriation can be found in modern expressive forms (poetry, fiction, drama, music, and oral history). Writing on calypso, the Caribbean art form that achieved international popularity in the years following World War 11 as an expression of political and social protest, Angrosino (79) has noted that "its language was drawn from that of the urban lower class of Port of Spain, Trinidad.... Its essential method is to

employ the exuberant vernacular to embody the good sense of the common people as they mock the pretensions of the elite.” That is not all, Rohlehr (13) has noted further, that it was “the language of the small-time confidence trickster...whose method is to spin words fast enough to ensnare his victim, or, in the case of calypsonian, to ‘captivate his audience’”.

Of reggae, Angrosino has remarked about its multicultural, intercultural, and transnational appropriation, (though it is essentially a West Indies Black genre). Thus: “Reggae has a large and heterogeneous international audience, but it is still thought of as the legitimate voice of dissent by many politically conscious lower-class West Indies. Reggae is composed almost exclusively in the nation’s language, the most appropriate language of dissent.” (79).

Plummer (41) has traced the etymology of the word to “the lower-class singers’ parody of the way middle-class people disparagingly say “raga”, short for ‘ragamuffin,’ the label applied to the poor of the Kingston slums.” These methodologies of self-improvement seized upon by other cultural forms, both local and international, should be adopted by the Ibibio masquerade theatre to ensure its perpetuity and relevance in a new world that admits of both the local and the foreign.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, we can conclusively say that traditional theatre practices have been exploited for the development of human species in our society. But this is not done without attendant challenges. They provide the models with which Ibibio masquerade theatre can improve and upgrade itself. As Homi K. Bhabha has noted:

The borderlines of work of culture demand an encounter with “newness” that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art...renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent” in between “space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia of living” (7).

We must be aware that the driving impetuses which also increasingly define and characterize life or culture in our present century, are what Benhabib (16) describes as “global hybridity” or “interstitiality.” What is desired precisely is a rethinking (or outright jettisoning) of our old ideas of ruralism; rusticity and happy innocence; and making accommodations for conditions of humanity that is composed more and more of multinational and multicultural residents, or migrants, or post-and ex-colonials. In reminiscing over the global cultural and, or, cosmo-political structuring of Bhabba’s “in-between” spaces, relevant resonances from our collective racial memories as Ibibio men and women will continue to revitalize our modes of cultural production in the modern world, but it should not be our only influence. We must perceive motivations for us to improve and excel using the

braids of “travelling” or “foreign” cultures. When traditional, political and economic systems begin to adapt to new or changing circumstances and institutions, cultural production is usually modified to reflect these changes.

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