

# THE SATIRICAL CONTENT OF AKPOHA-AFIKPO OKUMPKO MASQUERADE THEATRE

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## **Abstract**

*Every society presents its performance through its socio-cultural eye. The thematic preoccupation and content of these performances could be anything from to entertain, to educate, conscientize, inform, satirize, lampoon, and even teach morals. Such performances have always been at the vanguard of human guide. In these societies, human idiosyncrasies have in some instances presented themes for comedy and or imbued with satirical contents. It is in laughter more than the serious drama that man's inadequacies are exposed and criticism passed for correction. In Akpoha-Afikpo, for instance, the Okumkpo Masquerade theatre has been there from time to check-mate the excesses of human foibles and follies through performance. The Okumkpo masquerade can therefore, deliver this message in any way it deems necessary as identified above. This is why the most potent tool in the kitty of the Okumkpo masquerade is satiric criticism of the society. This paper has therefore, identified satire as a veritable medium to underscore the commitment of the contents in the masquerade performance. Having employed an on-the-spot analysis research method of this performance, the paper established that Okumkpo Masquerade performance has variously used human nature, actions and inactions in its society as a means to satirically comment on topical issues.*

## **Introduction**

Africa is home to several traditions of performance, conceived as an ensemble of culturally marked and consciously staged practices in space and time before an

audience. Many of these traditions are of ancient origin, while others emerged with formal European colonization of the continent in the 19th century and the subsequent imposition of western education, religion, and culture (Olaniyan, 354). Far back into the history of Africa, anthropologists have studied the peoples through their performances. Invariably, the anthropology of the people can be understood through the content of their theatre or performance.

Performance is one of the oldest institutions in Africa and has always reflected the life of the community and its ethics and therefore, is a social as well as a religious activity that usually concerns everyone in the community as a collective. This, however, does not mean that at any given performance, all the people are both actors and spectators. It means that the action of the performance has relevance to the community as a whole. Traore (17) contends that "African theatre translated the totality of human expression by giving us glimpses of the religious, social and political life of the community."

The masquerade theatre which is an older tradition of performance is non-scripted, community based, improvisational and also performed in indigenous African languages with social appendages. The term performance shall be used in this paper bearing in mind its diverse applications and connotations. Thus performance could be geared towards entertaining, informing, educating, criticizing and or even to teach

morals. When performance has a critical undertone, the society is at crossroads of satirical criticism as such it exposes the under belly rot of its people; the audience with a view to teach morals. The performance effervescence of Okumpko Masquerade theatre can be located within this thrust of meaning.

Okumpko masquerade has been selected in this paper because of its social satiric content and commentary on topical issues in its performances. Major themes in its performance has been selected at random and examined. It is worthy to note that this performance has been able to reveal startling topical issues confronting the society at large. Though on a lighter scale, we laugh at our follies, these biting topicalities conscientize us and behind the façade of laughter is the stark reality of a rotten society which is been exposed for us to make amends. This is social satire.

Wilson (26), defines satire as an “art form related to traditional burlesque, but with more intellectual and moral content”. It is this intellectual and moral value of satire that differentiates it with other forms of high comedy. He continued that “satire employs wit, irony, and exaggeration to attack or expose evil and foolishness. Satire can attack one figure... or it can be more inclusive...<sup>27</sup>. It is believed that satire that attacks an entire society is an exception to the notion that comedy usually exposes individuals who are foolish and excessive rather than criticize society. There is no other

form of performance with as much corrective and didactic purpose as satire

Satire as a performance genre is a form of social control, a mechanism for checkmating societal, group or individual excesses. Bamidele (28), in theorizing about satire in society says that the genre came about in a cultural climate that saw the form of literature in the service of its didactic intent. In all facets of life, man needs to conform to a social norm and so satire in its various methods and styles; irony, parody, invective, sarcasm and wit are a ready weapon.

In most cases our enjoyment and understanding of satire in text or on stage derives from our thought of political ineptitude or inadequacy of leaders, a system or an institution. According to Bamidele (29), satire acts as target of political wit. Political wit can be directed against social groups, circles or strata whose social position is contested: the nouveau rich, the hostility of the state, the conqueror, the police, the judge, doctors, priests, religious leaders. These people become the butt of satirical jibes or jokes when they act at variance with the norms of civilized societies.

Performance in the mold of Okumkpo Masquerade employs social satire tremendously to achieve and realize its aims and objectives of remodeling the society. Quoting Vanbrugh in Asigbo:

It is the business of the stage  
(*Performance*)

To copy out the follies of the age  
(*the people within the period*)  
To hold to everyman a faithful  
glass (*mirror our shortcomings*)  
And show man of what species he  
is, an ass (*our nature/idiosyncrasies*)  
(8) Emphasis added.

It is a general knowledge however, that, it is in satire more than any other form of comedy that man is exposed for what he is.

In traditional African performance forms, satire plays a prominent role in sanitizing the society. The moonlight story-telling sessions, the new yam festivals where the passing year is cleansed and the new-year is welcomed with ululation, fun-fair and pageantry, the activities of the last year is satirically x-rayed and wished/washed away. There are short sketches of henpecked and effeminate men, domineering and naggish house-wives to mention but just a few. All these are brought to public ridicule through play within the play, impersonation and role playing. In the course of such performance, we see ourselves in our own mirror before the general view of the people. And because it is a communally bonded, we all know ourselves and conversely, our being ridiculed in the open, will make us to reassess, reappraise and adjust our seemingly bad ways to avoid such caricature coming our way again.

Ebong (30), summarizes the activities of a minstrel group in his native Cross Rivers thus:

At night a secret society, ekpiri akata, with the use of certain mechanism will disguise their voices, sang or repeat some satirical poetry aimed at holding up people's vices or follies to ridicule or lampooning against certain individuals or a group.

Considering the above, an element of theatre notably the tendency of comedy or satire is recorded with the performance of ekpiri akata. Though the performance is restricted to the night and for initiates, it nevertheless leaves those whose names were called at such odd hours to cross examine themselves and turn a new leaf since within the community they are now seen as social misfits.

### **Okumkpo Masquerade Performance**

The Okumkpo masquerade performance in Akpoha is a seasonal performance that takes place in dry season usually in November through to January, depending on when it is billed to perform and the readiness of the maskers. This is usually when all harvest from farm work has been concluded and the people are at rest. From its antecedent, it has been known to involve young agile men and the middle aged as well as young boys who are just getting introduced to all aspect of the people's masking art having just graduated into

manhood through the formal initiation process of the Ogo cult.

Ottenberg (13), observed the importance of this masquerade and its place of pride among the people of Akpoha-Afikpo when he remarked that “there is a rich and exciting variety of masquerades at Afikpo. The most popular one, and the best known to outsiders, is the Okumpko.” The Okumpko masquerade sings, dances and dramatizes to conscentize and sanitize the society. Its essence is to search out transgressors or admonish members of the community to be decorous. It also serves as powerful sentries who keep watch at night. Okumpko masquerade can be classified perfectly under what Echeruo (137) terms “Igbo myth, ritual and drama that incorporate elements of song, dance and costuming which in various combinations have resulted...as heroic drama, burlesque, satire and ribald comedy.” It is a total theatre, incorporating music, dance and drama.

Okumpko involves well-orchestrated planning and execution in its performance hence it usually involves the whole village and more in its bid to not only succeed but also to create an impression. This is because the concept of performance in traditional Africa goes beyond the surface name but demands perfection as each performance is measured in time and space of the performers and their aggregate performance. Quoting Okoye, “performances themselves attest to a governing aesthetic framework which strives to make every

performance a refreshing experience for the audience” (Okoye, 64).

In a typical African masquerade performance like the Okumkpo, the audience aspires to a better performance as each year presents different challenges in preparation and performance demands. In its preparation towards performance, the main Okumkpo (nnade Okumkpo) made up of the four actors and singers and the rest of the members of the inner circle who have at one time or another had the opportunity of wearing the sacred mask of the Okumkpo will usually start early in the year to gather up pieces of ideas and bits through listening to gossips among families, quarrels at home-stead, along the way to the stream among girls, from the market or farm among the women or the village rest house among the men, anything picked up will present scenarios that will be developed into a drama sketch, songs, mimes for ribald comedy, caricature, burlesque, buffoonery and satirical content for the Okumkpo masquerade performance.

There are significances attached to each of the masks and there are rituals carried out before each masker adorns the mask, this is because trees from where these masks are carved have their spirits inhabiting these masks and must therefore, be appeased before each of the Okumkpo main go out to perform before the audience.

This is what (Ottenberg, 11) meant when he said that “masks are also associated with deity of the secret

society called egbele.” He continued that “although this spirit does not reside in the face coverings but remains in the sacred bush...it is believed that if a man is not on good terms with egbele and he puts on a mask, he will become ill; occasionally it is said he may die.” Stories have it that an incident occurred involving an Okumkpo masker who failed to carry out the necessary rituals that will see it through the performance, and it ended up collapsing in the market. This was an (aru) and there was proper propitiation and sacrifice to cleanse the spirit of the mask and the masker.

The Okumkpo ensemble is made up of the following; **main Okumkpo**(four in number) characters who double as the lead vocalists and impersonators of the acts, they are costumed like the Greek actors of the ancient period, with padded jackets stuffed to give them larger than life frame. Another set of characters in the Okumkpo performance ensemble is the four middle-aged dancers called (**Nchatancha**). These dancers have a story line in their dance steps. The next set of characters are the youthful dancers or satirical scene of mock dancers costumed as; ladies (**nchekwa lugulu**), girls (**agbogho lugulu**), nursing mothers (**nne omogho lugulu** or **nne omogho njagidi**), others are costumed as the callous policemen, military officers, traffic warders, white men and their wives with their long noses represented on their masks, as well as fools and buffoons. Each of these characters is costumed to represent its role.

The next group is the chorus and drummers who make up the retinue around the four main Okumkpo masquerades at the centre. All of them have poles of palm-fronds with feathered masks and clothes of their choices and sing the chorus at the signal of the main Okumkpo or during interludes when the audience roars with laughter during any dramatization or impersonation of any person, group of persons or institutions.

### **The Satirical Content in Okumkpo Masquerade Performance**

“Okumkpo”, literally means stinger. Stinger according to the first entry in Encyclopedia Britannica (2013) is defined as “something that stings, especially a hurtful or critical comment. Okumkpo’s operations before the performance are like that of an ‘undercover,’ which is, the fourth meaning given to stinger in the same dictionary. Therefore, Okumkpo stings with its satiric and critical comments on the people. These salvos are usually directed at both men and women alike.

Men, who are effeminate, lazy, stingy, drunkard, gluttonous, stupid and even more as adulterers etc., are usually the subject of heavy criticism from the masquerade. It serves as a gadfly on the general members of the society who act in unconventional ways. Being masked such vituperations are usually overlooked but the lesson from the message is what sets Okumkpo masquerade different from other masquerades in Akpoha and serves as social commentary on the ills of

the society. The performance therefore, teaches moral in the face of biting satiric criticisms.

In fact, the general theme, the overriding preoccupation of the Okumkpo masquerade performance literarily means that, if somebody is neck-deep in stupidity and buffoonery, and the Okumkpo masquerade reveals and brings him/her to public ridicule, he/she will at least adjust and change for the better by learning his lessons the hard way – through ridicule and social criticism. This goes to buttress the position of Ottenberg, when he asserts, “the Afikpo Okumkpo is theatre par excellence” and that the “essence of the play is the direct ridicule and satirizing of real persons and topical events” (32). Okumkpo is a medium through which the young and middle aged adults can air their feelings about their elders (women and men alike) that they could not otherwise explore directly in public. He continued that it serves as “a tension-reducing mechanism for traditionalistic and progressive young men and for the elders watching the performances, in a social system in which generational conflicts are inherent” (32).

The socio-political objective and purpose of Okumkpo is made clearer in the following statement by Ottenberg:

The criticisms in the play serve to control the elder’s behavior, to cut down and level off the tendency of individuals to develop power to move toward a rank of individualism, which is

considered destructive to the community (129).

In Akpoha it is believed that the walls have ears because the Okumkpo is always eavesdropping (acting undercover) and nobody knows when it has come so close as to be an unseen guest at one's home. According to Ottenberg (129), "the content of the play falls into three broad categories: (1) the ridicule of persons who acted foolishly, (2) the criticism of leaders who do not lead properly, and (3) the maintenance of the relative roles of males and females." He went further to list out themes from which these categorizations were based and from where the Okumkpo masquerade bases its performance. A few examples will suffice; "Henpecked husbands, man who becomes drunk at a title ceremony and defecates in his pants, man who returns home poor and sells his father's land, man who is stingy in marriage and with his mother-in-law and men who die young because they bring in foreign medicines and do not control them properly." All these themes and sub-themes permeate the scenarios and songs of the Okumkpo masquerade performance even to the present. The Okumkpo masquerade having evolved out of the folk-songs of women will not only have a lingering swipe on them but also create an everlasting castigation of the women folk. In like-wise manner, such themes and sub-themes about women traverse the performance; women who dominate henpecked men, women who are interested in the secret society even when it is a taboo,

beautiful girls who reject suitors and wait for Mr.-right who never came, women who fail to get pregnant because they have had a close shave with the secret society. The main themes which are later developed in the performance are that women should behave like females, following the traditional sexual dichotomy, and that men should not behave like women or let females dominate them.

In African or precisely Nigerian oral performance, from where the Okumkpo's ancestry is traced, the focus is on the performance and its social context, or the function of the performance in society. The Okumkpo serves as a mediator between the ruler and the ruled, as an inciter, a moulder of opinion, and a social critic. It therefore, weaves its songs around the current situation in its community. Even when it entertains with its praises and songs, it no doubt serves as a gadfly, probes and conscientizes.

The biting vituperations of Okumkpo rest squarely on its myth as a masked performance. It can afford to bare its critical fangs on the audience without any confrontations. It is this inscrutable myth that leaves Okumkpo's performance largely 'uncensored.' Traditionally, masquerades have the highest level of freedom in a village. You cannot fight a masquerade. You cannot unmask it. And you have no right to identify the person under the mask, even if you know who he is. Once under the mask, he becomes sacred, a person used to embody the spirit. Okafor (39) asserts,

“as an instrument of disguise, the mask serves as the principal device for the invocation of the supernatural. As soon as an actor dons a mask, he is transformed on physical and spiritual levels. On the physical level, the mask conceals the identity of the wearer. The audience may guess or know the actor but such knowledge is not discussed in public Amankulor, states that:

It would be naive to suggest that the spectators do not know or cannot guess the identity of the masked performers. They do know and do guess at who are behind the masks, but that knowledge is not openly discussed. It is a convention not to discuss the identity of masked performers openly or else some evil could befall the culprit (54).

But the major reason is to protect the dignity of the performance and for the spectator to enjoy it in a proper manner. A taboo protects the actor and aids the depiction of the supernatural quality with which the mask invests the character. Okumkpo revels within this freedom to lash its audience albeit critically. The themes of Okumkpo masquerade performance range from wicked house wives, henpecked men, stingy husbands, uncaring house-wives, adulterer, slots, thieves, gossips, to lazy men, drunkards, and men who cannot marry more than one wife, in fact all sorts of social

misdemeanor from social misfits which are deemed topical enough serve as potent tools and themes for creativity by Okumpko masquerade. Generally speaking, the Okumpko performance is filled with satiric contents in both intent and purpose. But the most consideration will be given to dramatic actions, costumes, masks and the general ambiance of performance. Running through the performance is the mock dramatization of scenarios from bits pieced together from actions, acts, speeches, exaggerated dance steps and impersonations of the village people. The aesthetics here is that which emphasizes action, in which beauty and ugliness, delight and foolishness, come out of doing rather than being. And the movement has a sense of character, of display, and of showing off.

Another socio-satiric consideration is in the costumes which are humorous. The males dress up in masks pretending to be women and putting up all feminine antics, with high-heeled shoes they dance with gaiety and demonstrable flexibility. Even the different characters on parade; white man and his lady; this pair contend with such nasty comments from the audience as "Oyibo miss road," meaning they are not in their environment, the police; with his long baton or "talk true," yet its effort to wade off encroaching audience from the performing area is usually met with name calling (a dramatic irony implicit in their vocation and at the same time highlight the dirty nature of the people and their society. From these satirical comments, the

audience has a peep into what police represent in Nigerian society (corruption). The traffic warder; whose work is to direct the imaginary traffic with such exaggerated gusto and energy that the audience will not fail to notice and applaud, the army officer; with its battle ready kits and paraphernalia, walking with exaggerated agility, even the imbecile (Onukwu/Mmanwu Iberibe) are all representations of exaggerated visual aesthetics with its attendant social satiric functionalities. This role reversal incites humour, satire and comments on the patriarchal/male chauvinistic inclination of the African as they reduce serious issues to its lowest point of banality.

Though the general atmosphere is that of ecstasy and conviviality, yet behind this façade of laughter, there is much to ponder over, which is the satiric content of the performance (message).

### **Conclusion**

Societies all over create avenues to make their lives a better living experience. To checkmate the abuse that comes with untoward freedom, people tend to establish one form of mechanism of checks and balances or another in order to have a rancor free society. These checks could be in form of laws, sanctions, and impositions of fines, outright excommunication and ostracism. In Akpoha, a more veritable and potent outlet was devised; performance. In form of songs, dance, drumming, and masking, these were employed to

checkmate human foibles and follies. With mock-songs, individuals or institutions were ridiculed and poked fun at. These socio-satiric performances left the society in moderation of ways of life devoid of human excesses and extremities that could lead to coerce in the general strata of living.

This is Okumkpo masquerade's *modus operandi*. To use its performance as a platform and these individuals or institutions automatically become the butt of its satirical jibes or jokes when they are brought to public ridicule, having acted at variance with the established norms of the society they live.

Okumkpo Masquerade theatre emerged on the Akpoha performance arena when moral decay and general shift from public interest to individualism was the order of the day. This individualism is opposed to, and contradicts communalism, which the Igbo and which "akpoha" literarily means (clarion call, a call to action) people prize higher than the individual cult. "The individual is merely a quotient, for these remain a society that stresses group as distinct from individual consciousness" (Ekwuazi, 73). Okumkpo Masquerade's comic performance is therefore, satiric – having the qualities of wit, human irony or sarcasm used to expose societal vices or folly of the human nature. Therefore, the mood in satire exemplified in the Okumkpo Masquerade performance comes with a meaningful and purposeful laughter. Okumkpo exposes topical issues

inherent in the society in a ridiculous way at which morals are deducible at the end.

The themes and sub-themes of its performance over the years have served as standard ways of living in civilized societies. Okumkpo has always served as an arbiter and harbinger of a just and egalitarian society. It is within its performances that individuals, groups and institutions shy away from all sorts of evil practices and machinations, at least to stay upright means Okumkpo will stay off your back. It is a gadfly of a sort in Akpoha and beyond even to the government of the day especially politicians at home.

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