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iv

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EDITORIAL COMMENTS

This edition of the *Journal of School of Arts and Social Sciences (JASSLINK)* is unique in many respects. Apart from its multidisciplinary approach in content and methodology, the journal contains scholarly articles with direct relevance to content validity and effective teaching and learning for which Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education Otto / Ijanikin is known.

Also, this edition is a congratulatory one to the outgoing Dean, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Mrs. E. A. Ajayi who has been a motivating force behind intellectual growth and development in the College. The Research and Publication Committee congratulates you for a successful tenure of office, wishing you greater success in future endeavours.

It is our hope that students, teachers and general readers would benefit from the contributions of the journal to knowledge.

Rasheed Owoyele Ajetunmobi Ph.D

*Chairman, Research & Publication Committee
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CONTENTS

<i>Contributors</i>	ix
1. Global Crisis - Global Action: The Case of Hunger in Africa - M. O. Lawal.....	1
2. Ethnic and Communal Clashes in Contemporary Nigeria - Oyeleye, A. S.....	9
3. Corruption and Transparency in Nigerian Civil Service: Diagnosis and Prescription - Sanni, Mukaila Olamiku.....	23
4. Evaluating Social Studies Course Material and Resources in Primary and Junior Secondary Schools - Elegbede, C. B.....	40
5. Geography and Career Prospect in Nigeria - Peter A. Omofhemih.....	50
6. Students Performance in Aspects of Geography A Study of Selected Secondary Schools in Lagos Metropolis - Taiwo Delima.....	57
7. School Administration and Citizenship Education - Wale Olatunji.....	69
8. God in African Traditional Religion: Myth OR Reality? - C. S. Daodu.....	80
9. Religion as a tool for Political Stability in Nigeria - Harmona, O. A.....	90
10. The Home and the Family in Promotion of Christian Religious Studies - Hunye K. S. (Mrs.).....	97

11. The Role of Arabic in the Study of Islam - Balogun, M. A.....	102
12. Nigeria Music in Societal Alter - Babalola, Sunday Oludele.....	114
13. Music as a Cultural Image of Nigerians - Ogunbona, Simeon Bayo	119
14. Music for Physical Fitness and Good Health - Odunsi, V. O.	125
15. Performance as a Stress Area in Music Department of Nigerian Colleges of Education - Loko, O. O. (Mrs.).....	133
16. Folksongs in Music Education in Nigerian Schools - Yek - Ajenifuja, I. A.	138
17. Functional Education for Women, A Need in Rearing a Handicapped Child - Okunade, A. O. (Mrs.).....	143
18. Theatre and Feminism: Portrayal of Female Gender in Their Works - Adeniyi, Kehinde Abimbola.....	151
19. Theatre as Celebration in Traditional African Society: A Case Study of Ogudu Festival in Amokpu Nkpa, Abia State, Nigeria. - Olubunmi N. Adedina.....	159
20. The English Teacher - Education Programmes of Nigerian Universities	

- Roseline Abonego Adejare.....	168
21. Bilingualism and Language use in a Heterogenous Nigerian Society - Eze, Mabel Nkechinyere.....	189
22. Entry Qualification, A function of Students' Achievement in Tertiary Institution; A Case Study of School of Arts and Social Sciences, AOCOED - Adeyemi, B. (Mrs.).....	196
23. Evidences of Hebrew Origin of the Igbo - Eze, Cyprian.....	206
24. Women in Development: Erin-Ile Women in Precolonial Nigeria - Onaolapo, Foluso Anna.....	220
25. Awori Factor in the History of Agege: Issues of Relevance. - Fakayode, Michael Folusho.....	236
26. A Historical Analysis of the Origin of Igbesa - S. I. Ajayi.....	242
27. Nigeria: A Study of Precolonial Yoruba Government - Mamudu, K. Ganni.....	251
28. The Nineteenth Century Warfare in Yorubaland - Awofisayo, Oladipupo A.....	257
29. Farming in Nineteenth Century Nigeria - R. O. Ajetunmobi.....	269

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THEATRE AS CELEBRATION IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETY: A CASE STUDY OF OGUDU FESTIVAL IN AMOKAPU UNKPA, ABIA STATE, NIGERIA

OLUBUNMI, N. ADEDINA

Abstract

The development of indigenous dramatic tradition is inherent in festivals, rituals, cultures and religious ceremonies of African society. This has led to a more diligent study of the art form till date. Writers and critics have sprang up over the years to air different views and opinions about the traditional African culture, and a rich heritage that it is.

Prior to the advent of modern drama, Africans at large, had their own forms of drama. There was the development of a conscious interest in the past dance, festivals, rites and rituals of various ethnic groups. This had led to a more understanding of the nature, functions and aesthetic values of indigenous dramatic practice.

In these days, when individualism and materialism seem to be suppressing communalism, ethnic groups still find it necessary and important to assemble from time to time. At such gathering, festivals, rites, rituals and ceremonies become a binding factor to foster peace, love and unity in the traditional society. This includes the dramatization of folk traditions and the re-enactment of historic events.

In this light, theatre is operational. The word theatre, means the act of seeing therefore it means perception. Theatre encompasses plays, pantomimes, puppets, marionettes, musicals, multi-media expressions and all manifestations of avant-garde or alternative theatrical forms. As such, these traditional performances are regarded as being theatrical.

For the purpose of this study, theatre will be seen in the light

JASSLINK Vol. 6 No. 1 Nov, 2003 160

of celebration, in one, out of the numerous traditional festivals in African society. Ogudu festival is celebrated in Amokpu Nkpa in Abia State. Its theatrical value as seen in form, content and function will be discussed at length in this study.

Introduction

Origin of Ogudu

Amokpu, Nkpa, of Bende local government in Abia state, has a populace of about two thousand indigenes, home and abroad. It is just a segment of the whole town of Nkpa, which has nine other villages with their population up to that of Amokpu. From the boundary of the leper colony, it is about 10km to Nkpa, with Amokpu villages as the third place of call. It is in this locality that Ogudu festival is celebrated.

There are many myths surrounding the origin of Ogudu but only one is most outstanding. Widely accepted and believed. According to this version, Ogudu was once a mighty warrior who hailed from Amokpu, the warriors of Nkpa. He led, fought and won many battles for Amokpu and Nkpa town as a whole. He was indeed a very famous and wealthy man. Out of envy, some villagers conspired, killed and buried him. Not too long, the whole town of Nkpa faced a very fierce war in which their attackers had the upper hand. They killed, maimed, looted and raided their farms and homes. As a result, there was hunger, famine and fear in the whole land. There was no single soul from Amokpu, the great warriors, or Nkpa as a whole, to challenge these fierce warriors.

Africans generally believe that after death, there departed ones enter into a spiritual state of existence. They are called ancestors or the living dead. They are seen as immortal beings standing next to the spirits. Although invisible, they are still believed to be capable of wielding as much effectiveness and power as when they were still alive. These beliefs led a group of people in Amokpu to evoke the spirit of Ogudu. They appeased him and asked for his help and assistance. These group of elderly men later became the *Amaala* of Ogudu. Ogudu heeded their pleas, fought and won the battle for them once more. After this victory, he went back to the spirit world, leaving a promise to always come to their aid whenever

he is needed.

Harmony in the African society is believed to be made up of the living and the dead. In order to maintain this harmony and preserve a right relationship with the departed spirit, the people of Nkpa, decided to have a celebration, (that later developed to a festival), in honour of Ogudu. To constitute a link with the dead, They built an abode for him in form of a storey building right in the village square of Amokpu, where he hailed from. This is why Ogudu is considered as festival of Amokpu although, all in Nkpa town celebrates it, including visitors from neighbouring towns and villages beyond the borders. The people carved an effigy, housed it and call on him whenever there is the need for it. It is a general belief in Nkpa, that Ogudu's spirit lives in the effigy.

Performance of Ogugu

Ogudu festival is a fair, feast, fiesta, carnival, ceremony, celebration, encounter and ritual – a regularly scheduled gathering of people biennially. It involves amateur, professional, religious, secular and traditional activities. It is always the last festival to be performed in the year. Its performance come up after the harvesting period and the new yam festival. The main function of this festival is to bring to remembrance, the heroic deeds of Ogudu, an illustrious ancestor. Its other function is that of purging and cleansing the land from every evil deed of the past years.

Preparation

In preparation for Ogudu festival, a lot of transformation takes place in the town. The women weed all the nook and crannies of the villages including stream and farm paths. There is also a mass decoration of houses in all the villages. Houses are decorated with mud, charcoal, palm kernel and native chalk.

When a date has been fixed for the festival, which is usually in December, the "Amaala" that is, custodians of Ogudu, consult the oracle at Arochukwu. They will bring this oracle to Ampkupa, in the village square where Ogudu is housed. Here, rituals are performed. Goats and cocks are killed and the blood is rubbed on Ogudu's effigy. These rituals last up

to five to seven days and are exclusively performed by the "Amaala". This process is to appease, evoke Ogudu's spirit and empower him.

After this, the "Amaala" then choose the carriers of Ogudu. As many that want to be carriers are given the opportunity, both indigenes and non indigenes, as long as they do not defy any of the rules and regulations. A carrier must be married with children. He must be able bodied and strong physically. He must have performed and fulfilled all the customary laws in taking a wife. Also, he must not be involved in a black medicine known as "Juju". He must not have intercourse with his wife or any woman before and during the festival. This is mainly to preserve his strength for the task ahead. Finally, Ogudu's effigy must not fall off his head to the ground. If this happens, the carrier will perform the rites of *Nkwasi* meaning, giving to appease. The items required for *Nkwasi* are one big Igbo ram, one four eyed dog (which is hard to come by), seven white cocks, a keg of palm oil, native chalk, alligator pepper and kolnuts. Considering the cost of appeasement, each carrier tries as much as possible to retain Ogudu's effigy on their heads throughout the duration. Moreover, it is considered a thing of shame and the villagers will continually mock the carrier and even his family for a long time.

On the eve of Ogudu's appearance, every family prepare foods like fufu, pounded yam, *ugba*, roasted and spiced *egusi*, soups and *osun okwa* used for eating kola-nut and bitter kola. It is prepared with groundnut, palm oil, salt and pepper. The palm wine tappers provide palm wine in abundance so that buyers will have enough. Also, in-laws send foodstuffs, cooking ingredients, palm wine, local gin and fire wood to the families of their wives.

Performance

On the day of Ogudu's first outing, the *Amaala* will conjure and render chants. All the villagers home and abroad come to grace the occasion. Men, women, boys, girls, old and young assemble in the village square, singing and dancing. Immediately one of the *Amaala* opens the door of Ogudu, the young men begin his song of praise.

lyoo, lyoo, e - e - e lyoo, lyoo

Ogudu, ure, lyoo, lyoo, e - e - e lyoo, lyoo

Meaning: Hail, hail, eee, hail, hail
Fanciful Ogudu, hail, eee, hail

While singing this song, the carriers, one in front and the other behind, bring out the effigy carrying it on their heads. Once the people see this, there are shouts of joy and excitement rents the air. For some minutes Ogudu will move his carriers. This is because, he wants everybody to have a good view of him.

As soon as the carriers move, the villagers and all that have come to the festival follow suit. The old men and women are not involved in this because of their frailty. Moreover, they have also share in the fun in their early years and they want to leave the scene for the younger ones to replace them. The people that follow Ogudu are arranged in their age groups. One can easily distinguish one age group from the other by what they wear, how they sing and dance.

Ogudu dictates the pace at which his carriers and his entire followers move. He takes the carriers to the homes of his former *Amaala*, streams, farms and other places of importance in the village like the shrine. He can lead them as far as the borders of the village but does not enter into other neighbouring villages even in Nkpa town. As he goes to all these places, his followers sing, dance and hail him. When it is time for him to come back, usually in the evening, his *Amaala* will beat the "Ikwo", (a wooden instrument carved out of a tree trunk, with a rectangular opening in the middle). It is used mainly to send messages to other villages around. It can be likened to the Yoruba talking drum, *Bata*. Once Ogudu hears the Ikwo, he heads towards his house from where ever he is. When he gets to his house, he will be put inside his house. The young men fire gun shots, beat drums and *akpatakpa* (sticks) singing.

Egbe nda nda egbe,
Okpuo la o, o la la o,
Egbe nda nda, egbe o!

Meaning: The mighty hawk,
He has come back, he has gone in,
The mighty hawk.

The is the format that the festival will take every other four days. The effigy comes out on every first day of the four days, for four times. After Ogudu has gone in on each day, the crowd will disperse still singing, dancing and rejoicing to complete the celebration in their different homes, where there will be feasting. There is a lot of food and drink available for all and sundry. Visitors and indigenes are received in homes of their choices, as there is no restriction.

Costume and Make Up

The clothes worn by the age groups serves as their identities. The carriers wear a wrapper tied into skirts with rattles on their ankles. Designs are made on their faces, chest, hands and legs with native chalk. The carrier in front has a cock hung on his neck while both of them have palm fronds in their mouths to prevent them from making the slightest audible sound.

Young men tie wrappers on their waist having their bodies decorated with native chalk. They tie palm fronds on their heads ankles and wrists to signify warriors. The males wear white singlets and wrapper. Young ladies tie their wrappers in form of a three layer skirt with another tied on their chests. They also have native chalk decorations on them as well as rattles on their ankles, wrapper. Each of these groups are then classified into sub-groups according to their age range. All the wrappers used are *George* and *Abada* of bright colours.

Song, Music and Dance

Various age groups sing songs that are peculiar to them. They sing of important events in the villages. For instance, mothers sing of new births.

young men sing of ancestors, wars or wealth, while the ladies sing of love or marriages.

The major musical instruments used as accomplishment to the songs are, *ekwe* (a wooden musical instrument) gong and *askpatapka* (sticks). Music and song play a vital role in the performance of Ogudu. The songs dictate the moves made by Ogudu. For instance.

Ogudu, dum, dum, dum
Oji isi achuzo

Meaning: Ogudu, bang, bang
You clear the way with your heads.

Once this song is sang, Ogudu hits his head against walls or tree trunks. The carriers cannot in any way resist the moves of Ogudu because it is his spirit that is at work and the (carriers) are just an object to aid his moves.

The dance is also subject to music and song. The tempo, force and tune of song and music, suggest the body movements, that is, whether its slow, fast or vigorous dances. The older men and women limit their body movements to slow moves irrespective of the song and music.

Rounding Up

On the last day of Ogudu's outing, after he must have gone in, the *Amaala* perform a ritual of sending him off into the spirit world. They kill a white cock, cook and eat it right in the village square. This is done at night when everybody must have dispersed. The oracle from Arochukwu is taken back. Those that came from neighbouring and far towns return or stay to celebrate the new year, while everybody look forward to another eventful festival of Ogudu in another two years.

Elements of Celebration in Ogudu

Ogudu festival as celebration can be viewed from many perspectives. The constant re-enactment in African festivals is the aim of an illustrious ancestor, who lived a challenging life, worthy of emulation. This, in so

many ways has affected and constituted the form that the festival assumes.

One of the features in Ogudu as a theatre of celebration is the time of performance. The timing is such that it comes up after the harvesting season and the new yam festival. During this time, there is plenty to eat and drink in the town. This is to buttress the fact that Ogudu was the man that drove hunger and famine away from the town. Little wonder then, that there is great feasting during this festival. Varieties of foods are prepared by households, not only to feed their families, but as many guests that they might have. There is no restriction to where, when or who one eats with at this period, because it is believed that nobody will have an evil intention to harm anybody through food poisoning.

Another feature that projects Ogudu as celebration is that, it ushers in the new year. It purges the land of all evils over the years and prepare the people mind to welcome the new year. The new year is anticipated with great hopes and aspirations. It is a time when men decide to turn a new leaf, from bad to good renew their commitments and make new resolutions. Hence, the new year is usually welcomed with great rejoicing. Ogudu festival ends, two or three days to the first day of the new year. At this time, festivity is still very much in the air as a result of Ogudu festival, which is the talk of the town. The celebration of the new year is therefore seem as the climax of Ogudu festival, which lingers for two or three days into the new year. After which life returns to normalcy, people return to their occupations home and abroad.

The festival mood surrounding the performance of Ogudu festival, truly confirms that it is a theatre of celebration. There is a lot of dance, song, music, costume and make up for aesthetics. These features are seen only at occasions that bring happiness and joy to the lives of the people. Ogudu festival, lifts up the spirit of the people and re-assures them that life is worth living after all. At this period, there is a conscious awareness of merriment and enjoyment than hardship and suffering.

Still as a theatre of celebration, Ogudu has didactic values. It educates and enlighten, the outside world of the hidden treasures in Ogudu. In these modern days, the festival is recorded on tapes by sons and daughters of Nkpa and invited guests. When they go back to their different destination after the festival, the tape is made available to their friends and

167 *Theatre as Celebration in Traditional African Society*

neighbours who though not present at the festival, have the opportunity of learning, adding to their knowledge. Also in recent times, researchers have made Ogudu festival a fertile ground for research works as it relates to their different fields.

Lastly, Ogudu festival creates an avenue to improve on human relations. It eradicates segregation, hatred or division. During this festival period, there is the need for renewal of friendships, settlement of old scores and making of new friends. It is a period when young men come home to take wives. As such, after Ogudu festival, the town of Nkpa witness a mass wedding of sons and daughters of the land. One the whole, Ogudu festival encourages and fosters peace, love and unity in the society. The town itself witness a great calm and tranquility for a long time.

Summary and Conclusion

Theatre celebration in traditional African society is another of the many phases of theatre as practiced in Africa. Theatre is for education, enlightenment and entertainment on the premise of which Ogudu festival has been explored. Celebration in Ogudu, connotes, happiness, joy fulfillment and achievement as is the case of Nkpa indigenes in the performance of Ogudu festival, which is a feast, fair, fiesta and carnival.

The arts forms incorporated into this festival, such as, costume, make-up, music, dance, chants and renditions, add to the mood of the festival. These arts forms give life, vigour, enthusiasm and spectacles to the celebration. Also, in recent times, technology have influenced this festival to an extent, and can still be improved on. Researchers from other fields, have brought Ogudu festival into lime light, from their studies.

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