

ISSN 1595-0972

The Performer

**ILORIN JOURNAL OF
THE PERFORMING ARTS**



Vol. 9, 2007 and Vol.10, 2008

THE PERFORMER: VOLUME 9, 2007

TABLE OF CONTENTS	PAGE
1. Ogunde's Choreography and the National Question: The Example of "Nigeria" - Chris Ugolo	1
2. African Dramatic Imagination, Mythic Currents and Social Order - Tunde Awosanmi	12
3. Avant-gardism in African Dances: An Example of the Tiv-Jamaa Dance Group of Ombakor-Lele - Tor Iorapuu	33
4. Conceptual Analyses of Igòrù Musical Communication: The Weaving of Text and Theme - Ovaborhene Isaac Idamoyibo	52
5. Business and Marketing Imperatives for the Revival and Development of Nigerian Theatre Practice - Sola Fosudo	65
6. Symbolism in the Art of Playwriting: A Study of Sign and Transformability in Sam Ukala's <i>The Log in your Eye</i> - Uche-Chinemere Nwaozuzu	76
7. An Ethnomusicological Perspective on Ekuechi Festival of Ebiraland - Solomon Ikibe and Victoria O. Ikibe	88
8. The Dialectics of Self-Reliance and Progress in Rotimi's <i>If...</i> and <i>Hopes of the Living Dead</i> - Caleb O. K. Momoh	97
9. From Esoteric and Aesthetic Values to Ethical Connotations in my Father's House: <i>Ohimiyan</i> Songs in Perspectives - A. G. Alamu	106

From Esoteric and Aesthetic Values to Ethical Connotations in my Father's House: *Ohimiyan* Songs in Perspectives

By

A. G. Alamu*

Introduction

Scholars of ages have been so keen about probing into the esoteric as well as aesthetic nature of religion. Durkheim (1912:48) and Weber (1958:59) evince the most profound values of societal beauty as being infinitely connected with the religious institutions. Therefore, religion plays a major role in expressing basic aesthetic values and ultimate issues that find expression through prayers, rituals, drama, music and dance. Put differently, these esoteric and aesthetic demonstrations serve the schema of a religious ceremony celebrated among the people with a view to understanding practical nature of reality and the significance of existence. *Ohimiyan* festival also called *Ukpe* of which we shall be discussing the musico-ethical connotation, has masqueraders that serve both esoteric and aesthetic values. Subsequently, *Ohimiyan* as a religious ceremony unifies and consolidates the Ivbiodohen society, because it is generally believed that through this medium people express their feelings and emotions even sentiments through singing, dancing, clapping of hands and the expression of joy. Often times, these songs are not only aesthetic and melodious but also ethical in nature. Undoubtedly, it is an occasion to honour the divinities and the ancestors for a successful agricultural year and to pray and hope for another glorious year (Quarcoopome, 1978:87). Thus, in this paper, we will explore the historical evolution of *Ohimiyan* festival, its religious and social relevance, the songs in the festival and their ethical connotations which are the bulwark of the work.

Dr. A. G. Alamu lectures in the Department of Religions, University of Ilorin, Oyo State, Nigeria

Historical Evolution of *Ohimiyan* Festival in Ivbiodohen

It is pertinent to know where *Ohimiyan* festival originated from. It behooves us to assert that *Ivbiodohen* is a village in Okpuje, sub-clan in Iuleha in the present day Owan West Local Government Area of Edo State in Nigeria. The people are known for Agriculture and hunting expedition. These people observe an annual festival known as *Ohimiyan*.

Precisely, in the 19th century, Aroze Irian, an indigene of Ivbiodohen went to Orhue, an outskirts of Ozalla in one of his hunting expeditions and saw the people of Orhue celebrating life with festivals. He watched them with keen interest and later went home to apprise his people of his discovery.¹ The people in turn encouraged him to bring the festivals home if he could lay hands on them. Aroze Irian from the family of Uriala went back to Orhue for close surveillance. This time in question, he actively participated in the festivals and thereon, he was seriously planning to convey them home. He made several attempts to bring them and he failed. It was until a fateful day, he succeeded when the people were deeply asleep and turned backward, and he was moving progressively, until he perhaps got to *Uhonmora* which was some miles before he could turn around as a result of the mystery surrounded the festivals.² Aroze successfully brought the festivals home alongside their props and costumes and he subsequently informed the people of the kind of festival it was and how they would be celebrating and doing it.³ Ododo (2003:176) however observes based on what is obtainable in *Ohimiyan* that the nature of the mask and its costume items differ depending on the intensity of organisation and the artistic resourcefulness of the masquerades and those involved.

Subsequent upon the instructions given by Aroze to the people, he was mandated to be the chief custodian to keep them in his house, and even at death his lineage continues to enjoy the privilege of harbouring them. This singular agreement made his tie to be excepted from the taboo associated with the *Ohimiyan* and the pardon for any breach which they still enjoy till date. Thereafter, *Oyen*, one of the renowned chiefs bought the *Ohimiyan* masquerades *Ukpe* and instructively informed the people to be using them for religious co-existence and social solidarity. Thus, *Ohimiyan* festival manifests

this attribute coupled with the aesthetic and functional context of its religious practices and cultural values. It is expedient to list the *Ohimiyan* at a glance:

- | | | | |
|------|-----------------|-------|----------------------|
| i. | Yan lo Oghuomon | ii. | Ofiomen ni sé ré e |
| iii. | Ofiomen logbale | iv. | Okodiyen |
| v. | Olovbae | vi. | Umague |
| vii. | Uoko | viii. | Ologho. ⁴ |

It is also noted that at the commencement of the festival, the first masquerade to be seen is *Yan lo Oghuomon*. It may appear just once or twice, and it lasts for just two days before the rest masquerades come to the fore for various celebrations.

The chief custodian or Chief Priest of the *Ohimiyan* is usually the eldest man of the community. In case the most eldest declines to assume leadership role as a result of his belief, conviction or religious inclination, the next in age bracket automatically assumes leadership. In fact, one can avoid this through abstinence from eating the sacrifices and the refusal to accept every emolument. The chief priest is accorded the honour of the host and it is he who is ultimately responsible for all that happens during the festive celebration. He also has a special ritual which he must perform personally during each festival.⁵ At the death of the Chief Priest, the *Ohimiyan* would be returned to *Aroze Uriala's* family, pending when the next oldest person would automatically take over. Here, it must be emphasized that men who are initiated have exclusive right to the masquerades and their celebrations. However, the non-initiates and women are not allowed to know the relics. But, women are not forbidden to watch and celebrate the festival and they have explicit covert roles that are tangential to the festive essence of *Ohimiyan*.

Chronologically therefore, it would be better appreciated to know some of the custodians or chief priests since the inception of the festival. Late Pa. Oyakhire, Idehai, Ilevbabor, Ohiosimuan, Igboin, Aregbai, Ugbodovon, Izegbu, Alamu, Ehimika, Ayeni Odigure, Iyoyo, Odiikeke, Amojó, Ohikhuare and Asikhia; who is the current Chief Priest of the festival. He is also known as the senior living representative of the ancestors. As a sacred person, he approaches the ancestors on behalf of the community to offer sacrifices.⁶ In some cases the Chief Priest has some delegated specialists in the work of

propitiation who will instruct him at times in rituals to be performed.'

Having chronologically presented *Ohimiyan* festival and its fact, it is instructive to add that it has received serious blow in recent times as a result of the advent of Christianity and the influx of the wind of Pentecostalism in the community (Alamu, 2008:162). Be that as it may, one thing is certain that *Ohimiyan* festival makes itself so readily available that anybody could come to celebrate without feeling alienated. The truth is that since it speaks the language of the people and people do not need to go to school in order to learn it, it would be difficult for *Ohimiyan* to go into extinction.

Esoteric and Aesthetic Ceremony of *Ohimiyan*

The festival takes place in February each year and it lasts for a period of four to seven months as the case may be. Before the exact date of the festival is fixed, the Chief Priest consults with other Chiefs in the community by following the lunar cycle of the community. Then the outcome of the consultation would be announced to the community on the possible date. The final date is then heralded to the people so as to make the people adequately prepared. Three days to the actual day, there is the communal possession of the last initiates round the community, and this is called "agho". The penultimate day to the final day it would "appear", everybody will be made to stay in door in the night except those who have been initiated and have celebrated their manhood who must have clocked the age of forty. This manhood celebration is also associated with the festival at the space of every five lunar calendar year. Nobody comes out till the following day when all the priests or officiants start drumming. During the night, some weird displays referred to as *Oguagua* are usually made by the custodians from forty years and above and anyone who happens to violate their behest, a goat would be purchased for propitiatory or purificatory rites.

The festival is ushered in by masqueraders who dance around the village before some sacrificial rites are performed. These include fowls, kolanuts, goat and gin *Ogogoro* and some relics hidden from the non-initiates. Parts of the offerings are placed in the shrine. After the sacrifice, the masqueraders dance in two, as the case may be. The initiates praise and eulogise the praise names of the masquerades.

calling them all sorts of befitting appellations. *Ohimiyan* performers use certain prop and costume items that are made up of traditional leatherwork or woven clothes. These are symbolic and preparatory, however they are found around Igarra. As a result of the volatile, spiritual and symbolic nature of *Ohimiyan* festival, the performers often use costumes to enhance their concealment. Interestingly, their costumes are, therefore, tailored to reflect their praise-names. Besides, these props and costumes are significant because it is around them that the concept of *Ohimiyan* performance has outward manifestations. Mask or masquerade wear is beautiful, daring and exciting as carnival masks (Ododo, 2003:176). These masquerades and officiants dance and sing round the community to amuse people and get gifts of money from the people. Some people at this time would come home from all walks of life to participate and celebrate the *Ohimiyan* festival.

At times, celebrations are made some days and fortnight usually from Saturday night till Sunday evening during which the hopes of people are kept alive. This tells the faith of the priests and subjects in ancestral worship when sometimes their songs lead to spontaneity. At times, the rendition and melody of *Ohimiyan* songs are action-packed usually arranged for the admiration of the spectators. The ceremony of the festival comes to an end with grandeur of rituals and celebration of which people would come out in their best attires and cooking of rice occurs even in the poorest family. It is equivalent of Christian Christmas during which the chief priest would sit in state and receive homage from his sub chiefs, subjects, and emoluments which are shared after the celebration. These masquerades dance admiringly to the admiration of the spectators to round off the celebration. Succinctly, therefore, esoteric and aesthetic elements are appreciated in religions because of their sensual or beautiful attachments and relevance on the one hand, and the basis for connecting the existential, theoretical and practical aspect of human nature to the divine on the other hand. In the sphere of philosophical religion, Mbiti (1991:143) is of the view that the esoteric and aesthetical aspect of human religiosity together with their emotional and spiritual components is often given rapt attention in African Religion in particular.

The Religious and Social Relevance of *Ohimiyan* Festival

Festivals add to the grandeur of both personal and communal rituals. The *Ohimiyan* Festival marks the return of the ancestors to the community. Put differently, the festival welcomes the spirits to human societies and to celebrate and renew the fertility of the people and fields. The religious values are repeatedly renewed through communal festivals. In the same vein, oral communication is also resonated with the unseen world, the link between human beings and the spirits is renewed and yet the two worlds are kept at a healthy distance from each other (Idowu, 1996:111).

Succinctly, Mbiti (1991:143) helps a great deal in summarising the religious relevance in this paradigm:

People seize such occasions to solicit blessings from God or the departed, and there is a general feeling that the visible and the invisible worlds coexist for the benefit of man who is at their centre. Rituals and festivals are religious ways of implementing the values and beliefs of society.

Annual celebrations are important to reaffirm and consolidate these religious values which are inherent and inveterate in Iybiidohen. Outside this, people's life becomes dull and life will not be meaningful to them.

The *Ohimiyan* festival is also a social event in Iybiidohen because those who travel far and wide do make it a point of duty to be present during the celebration. In fact, new friends are made and new relations established. At times, marriage proposals are made (Quarcoopome, 1978:88). Awolalu and Dopamu (2005:149) corroborate this fact when they averred that "the coming together of the people is re-enacted, and many people for the first time in the year meet on festival occasions. Men and women are brought together in one crowd, and there is usually a sort of social re-union."

Thus, *Ohimiyan* festival endows the social order with mystical values also which evoke acceptance of the social solidarity that moves far beyond the obedience exacted by the secular sanction of force (Parrinder, 1974:102). The people of Iybiidohen see this *Ohimiyan* as social safeguard of the basic needs of their existence and

of the basic relations that make up their social order – land, rain, bodily health, the family, the community. By and large, the people during this time help to foster the sense of identity and belonging as well as solidarity. These are the integrative and cohesive factors upon which the survival and continuity of the Ivbiidohen community depends (Mbiti, 1991:143). There are also many economic benefits derived during the celebration of *Ohimiyan* festival.

Songs and Their Ethical Connotations

During this annual festival, worship is arranged publicly at a particular quarter. This worship is always echoed with songs, dancing, drumming, clapping of hands and stamping of foot on the ground. The songs are always noisy and cacophonous during public worship. Through music, singing and dancing, people are able to participate emotionally and physically in the act of worship, and this often leads to ecstatic experiences. The songs penetrate into the very being of the worshippers and as well convey their faith, their beliefs in and about the divinity, their assurances and hopes with reference to the hereafter. Through worship we learn the attributes and praise-names of divinities.

In African set up, music and dance are ways of life that is why Geoffrey (2002:43) is apposite in this regard when he said *inter alia* that "Africans dance for joy and they dance for grief; they dance for love and they dance for hate, they dance to bring prosperity and they dance to avert calamity; they dance for religion and they dance to pass the time." Through songs, the people celebrate life and move the body rhythmically to express their joy, thanksgiving and sentiments. Religious singing is often accompanied by clapping and dancing by a number of officiates as the congregation joins in the chorus. The community is engulfed with these songs and gong is heard every where. The devotees express their joy before the divine being. During the sacred day worship, songs are raised by the leaders and strictly followed by the adherents. Besides these songs, lighter songs may occur during public worship and may be struck up spontaneously by any worshipper. Some songs are invocatory, liturgical, praise worthy, scurrilous, incisive, amusing, exciting and among others and they connote ethical meanings and values.

In line with the above, Emielu (2006:99) opines that African socio-communal music is characterised by a repertory of religious songs, work songs, satirical songs, insult and ridicule songs. He further observes that music plays a dominant role in community life in Africa, which cuts across all facets of communal life including ritual ceremonies and festivals, a variety of domestic and group activities. Emielu (2006:98) citing Akpabot (1986:95) classifies fourteen songs text in African music: (1) Historical (2) Social control (3) Insult (4) Obscene (5) Praise (6) Children's (7) Funeral (8) Work (9) War (10) Humorous (11) Communication (12) Women's (13) Philosophical and (14) Ritual songs. However, this classification perhaps may not in all cases accommodate the range of musical expressions among the numerous ethnic groups in Africa it does provide an essential framework for categorizing music in traditional African societies. It is expedient therefore to turn to some *Ohimiyan* songs and their ethical meanings since that is the bulwark of this paper.

1. Arising from Akpabot's (1986) classification of African songs, the first song fits into songs of praise of Aroze Irian, the foundation custodian. This represents hymn of praise and goodwill;

E O vbirian o
Aya wu ewe Aroze eh

Aroze the son of Irian,
You don't accept Aroze's
goat as a mulct.

The ethical value portends that Aroze did good by bringing joy to the people and he and his lineage should be reciprocated for his goodwill by exculpating his generations from culpability. Reciprocity and honour are extended to his generation for bringing *Ohimiyan*.

2. The second song based on the above mentioned classification depicts a song of Insult and social control. A hymn of restraints from evil deeds.

Okun lovbi Imona

Okun ye Igila e

Okun, the son of Imona
has gone to England.

"England" in this context means "forced exile" or unknown destination *Terra Cognita*. Okun was a wicked "Okakuo". "a General" who was dethroned and deported to where the people called "England" along with Oba of Benin, Ovbieramen Nogbaise. They were both deported to the Old Calabar as later discovered. Therefore, it is not morally good to be wicked for whatsoever a man sows, he shall reap *Arialusi*. It was the general belief of the people that King Okun was despotic and he needed to be exiled.

The third song is a song of pure insult on Abuivboo who was sorcerer in the community;

3. Ikuo khuo gbe Abuivboo
Abu ivbore Avbioghola
Ikhuo khuo gbe Abuivboo eh

Abuivbo is decaying alive
Abuivbo from Avbioghola
He is decaying alive.

This is a reminiscent of evil and the society condemns a witch doctor who prepares sorcery for another man. For the recompense of such an act of the man was to decay before death. Therefore, the society warns people of like-minds to desist from such evil act, for sorcery is condemnable in its entirety.

Thus, the following song is philosophical flowing from Akpabot's categorization;

4. Olovbae ria egba ah

The red man has defaced
and defiled his body.

Red colour signifies sanctity of the Priests of the people's religion. The Priests are honoured and recognised with red attires and symbolic ornaments around their neck or waist. As such they become sacrilegious as they defile their priesthood because of adultery,

bribery and other immoralities. Therefore, sin is prohibited by the community.

5. Ee oghe
E Oghe
O promiscuous man
O promiscuous man

Promiscuity is an abominable and condemnable act which is frowned at in the community. In Akpabot's analysis, this category falls into obscenity and social control.

6. A song of rejoicing signifying an appeal for blessing.
Aimi o ro more
Roghore yoyo
O Heaven, give us children
and money aplenty.

The people abhor stealing of children in the community and they also frown at adoption of a child. They detest barrenness that is why they pray for children and fruitful blessing because they hate bastard children. As regards Akpabot's classification, this song fits into communication and request.

7. In Akpabot's categorization, this song portends humorous and ritual song. This humorous and ritual song is rendered at the commencement of the annual worship. This is usually seen as processional or commencement hymn always rendered at the first ritual dance on public display.

Yanran Mi Oghuomon
Yanran Mi Oghuomon
Eagle appears brightly
Eagle appears brightly.

It is a symbol of purity and strength in the society. Eagles seldom appear in the public and it is difficult to grasp eagle and thus eagles are special birds among other birds.

Apparently, songs are parts of the solemn rituals; and sacred day worship is important during the annual festival celebration. Idowu (1996:116) avers that ritual dances of this kind are not mere

random movements or mere emotional responses to the rhythm of music. They are symbolic and often re-enactments of something sacred. Most of *Ohimiyan* dances are of fixed pattern and must be observed correctly. These patterns must also be carefully followed to the latter, failure which may be disastrous to the effectiveness and cohesion of *Ohimiyan*. Therefore, the speech of the music instruments and leaders in the public worship are often designed to guide the participants in their movements (Idowu, 1996:116). In sum, in the words of Shakespeare *In Tempest* that "if music being the food of love, play on" holds sway as people display their artistry and the energetic display and nuances inherent in *Ohimiyan* begin to manifest as memories are kept alive as darkness would not allow them to continue.

An Appraisal of Ohimiyan Festival

The arrival or import of Western civilisation with its consequent educational and industrial opportunities has led to the mass exodus of people to urban centres in search of greener pasture and the influx of the adherents to the churches. All these put together have unfavourably affected the participation of people during *Ohimiyan* festivals. Thus, the number of participants has drastically reduced over the years and if the modern trend continues then the end of the festivals is in sight. But, with the ethical values the festival preaches and entrenches in the face of dynamic society we are today and their corresponding effect on the society, *Ohimiyan* festival is bound to survive though with limited attendance.

Conventionally, the *Ohimiyan* does not allow people of less than forty years of age to see the ancestral cult or shrine where the *Ukpe* is kept. Today, some people who are less than forty years of age are initiated and can see the ancestral cult where the *Ukpe* is kept. This place is called, *Ugbo Ohimiyan* meaning "the bush where the masquerades are kept". The place is preserved, secured and secluded from the people. Indicatively, this act of seclusion does not allow many people to come out to fully participate because some people believe there is something mysteriously hidden and enclosed from the people, and so people do not want to worship and honour divinity ignorantly. This also reduces the number of participants regrettably

when the survival of the community in modern times anchors to a large extent on the sense of identity and solidarity promoted by the traditional festivities (Quarcoopome, 1978:89). The manner in which the *Ohimiyan* was brought by Aroze to the people is nothing but stealing in the worst order.

Conclusion

Having explored the historical evolution of the *Ohimiyan* Festival, its social and religious relevance; songs and their ethical connotations; we shall conclude this research work by asserting that through the *Ohimiyan* Festival, the life of the community is revived, people are entertained, and their tensions find an outlet. *Ohimiyan* festival of Ivbiodohen community also brings people together as a reunion by enhancing and empowering their co-existence and font of solidarity. Thus, Mbiti (1991:143) is apposite in this regard when he concludes on this note that

Festivals also bring together the people as a group, thus strengthening their unity and cohesion. Religious and social values are repeated and renewed through communal festivals. Artistic talents are utilized to the full... the link between human beings and the spirits is renewed and yet the two worlds are kept at a healthy distance from each other... People seize such occasions to solicit blessings from God or the departed, and there is a general feeling that the visible and the invisible worlds coexist for the benefit of man...

Sequel to the above quotation, it is crystal clear that despite the shortcomings of the *Ohimiyan* festival in Ivbiodohen, life is revived and celebrated. Unity and cohesion are given impetus, skills are discovered, religious and social values are repeatedly enhanced; blessings are sought through the divinities and ancestors. Succinctly, people still participate wholeheartedly, spontaneously and naturally despite the pendulum, hence human life needs some relevant festivals and rituals to give it both solemnity and laughter (Mbiti, 1991:143). Festival is not a pride, pageantry and sophistry but a religio-cultural re-enactment of the people to their divinities and spiritual renaissance at the levels of the individuals and the community.

Endnotes

1. Oral interview with Sunday Alamu, aged 75, at Ivbiodohen during a focus discussion on the 12th January 2002.
2. Oral interview with Iriemi, E, aged 76, at Ivbiodohen during a focus discussion on the 12th January 2002.
3. Oral interview with Sunday Alamu, aged 75, at Ivbiodohen during a focus discussion on the 12th January 2002
4. Ibid
5. Oral interview with Iriemi E, aged 76, at Ivbiodohen during a focus discussion on the 12th January 2002
6. Ibid
7. Ibid
8. Oral interview with Sunday Alamu...

Works Cited

- Akpabot, Sam. 1986. *Foundation of Nigerian Traditional Music*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books
- Awolalu, J.O. and Dopamu, P.A. 2005. *West African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: Macmillan Press.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1912. *The Elementary Form of Religious Life*. Paris: University Press.
- Emiclu, Austin. 2006. "Afro-American Music and the African Identity: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis," *The Performer: Ilorin Journal of the Performing Arts*, 8: 96-108.
- Geoffrey, G. 2002. "Interactions of Religions", *African Dances*. Ibadan: University of Ibadan.
- Idowu, E.B. 1996. *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. Lagos: Longman,
- Mbiti, J.S. 1991. *Introduction to African Religion*. USA: Heineman Books.
- Ododo, S.E. 2003. "Eku Performance Art Amongst the Ebara", *African Culture, Modern Science and Religious Thought*. Ilorin:ACRS
- Parrinder, E.G. 1974. *African Traditional Religion*. London: Sheldon Press.
- Quarcoopome, T.N.O. 1978. *West African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: African University Press.
- Weber, M. 1958. *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans, by Talcott Parsons, New York: Charles Scribner's Son.