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EDITORIAL ADDRESS:

The Editor,

The Abuja Communicator,

Department of Theatre Arts

University of Abuja,

P. M. B. 117, Abuja, Federal Capital Territory,
Nigeria, West Africa.

Phone: 234 (0) 803 589 1944

E-mail: eedeeds@yahoo.com

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THEATRICAL PAGEANTRY AS A FUNCTIONAL FEATURES OF RITUAL FULFILMENT IN NIGERIA

By

Ibrahim Binta Fatima

Introduction

In Nigeria, spectacular processional plays are meant for the illustration of historical and archetypal event that can reinstate the well being, progress and future of the citizenry. This instance is what is referred to here as theatrical pageantry. It is a phenomenon that involves an elaborate parade used to display an important philosophical concept. The society uses this to renew and reconstruct socio-cultural forms and images. Theatrical pageantry in the Nigerian traditional setting for example, the Bassange ritual process which is used as the case study here, exposes two categories of performance features; verbal and non-verbal. These are reclassified into structural and functional parts in order to display their intensiveness. This article affirms the relativity of archetypal assertions of Jung (1972:8), Frazer (1922:14), Freud (1954:164) and Bodkin (1934:2) to Nigerian performance forms content and functional transmission.

Finnegan (1968:24) observing African and oral drama generally, concludes that most importantly in any performance is the idea of enactment, of representation through actors, who imitate persons and events. "This is also usually associated with other elements, appearing to a greater or lesser degree in different places. The linguistic content; plot; the represented interaction of several characters; specialized scenery e.t.c. often music and of particular importance in most African performance; dance." Finnegan's observation is quite relevant to the theatre display of the Bassange people of Kogi State, Nigeria during their Kuti festival.

The purpose of this article becomes a dual one. Firstly, to make more explicit, the above listed performance features of Finnegan into their verbal and non-verbal aspects for clarity of function. However, Ruth

Finnegan failed to reinforce the functional basis of the above listed theatrical elements in the communities where they are used. Hence, this article fills the vacuum opened by Finnegan for further research as it concentrates on the pragmatic function of these theatrical elements.

This article differentiates the actual proceedings of the Bassange from other forms of oral drama such as masquerades performance, naming, marriages, funeral, title-taking and so on. This particular ritual drama aims at the deliverance of cultural information through a collective dissemination of coded messages. As a result of this, the techniques used in its delivery become a specialized and important one.

The Bassange People of Kogi State, Nigeria

The *Bassange* people dwell in Kogi State of Nigeria. Ita (1969:2) notes that; Kogi is a civil servant centered state in the North Central Zone of Nigeria. He adds that it is called 'the confluence state' due to the fact that confluence of River Niger and River Benue is at Kogi State capital, Lokoja. It was in Lokoja while gazing out at the River that stretched before her, that Lord Lugard's wife coined the name Nigeria. Lokoja is two hours drive from Abuja; the Nigeria Federal Capital. Lokoja natives are Bassange people. The Bassange people are farmers of principal cash crops notably; yam, cassava and melon. As a social unit of Ngezim group of tribes involving the Kakanda, Bassakom, Cupa and Nupe, the Bassange people speak Bassa language. Bassa language is a dialect of Nupe language. Bassange land is one of the settlements along the Upper Niger Basin Region of Nigeria. "The evergreen and thick rainforest land of Bassange people are the ecological zone which began from where the mangrove swamp terminates' upland in the Niger Basin. (Bodkin, 1934:2).

Among these people, the ritual theme is based on their cultural conventions and ideology. The conventions are the laid down principles that performance and its final enactment. No wonder Soyinka (1976:49) refers to a rituals in the African context, as "a culturally pattern symbolic action that reveals the functions of many other aspects of the people's social life". In the Bassange ritual circumstance, it is the importance of the ancestors that are being reinvoked. This reinforces Killam's (1969:4) opinion on Nigeria rituals. He says that "rituals are created by man to explain the problems and mysteries of life and death- his attempt to make sense of the bewildering complexities of existence."

As a living culture, certain inherent and essential systems of beliefs, ideas and worldview are displayed in the Bassange ritual performance as indications of modes of perception and sensibility. Ritual among this set of people is a worship involving the performance of certain rites for the purpose of ensuring some control over the lords that determine the people's existence and survivor. Tuner (1968:4) defines rituals in this regard as "prescribed formal behaviour of occasions having reference to beliefs and practices performed by a specific cult association." In the Bassange community of Nigeria, from the ritual performances, a larger corpus of cultural materials can be screened via their form and structure. The form, content and transmission of the ritual is the indicator of its impact on the vision, worldview, custom and general livelihood of the people.

Entering Bassangeland at the time of the ritual performance, which is usual during the dry season, one can easily feel the excitement of the entire communal members. Children, women, men run helter-skelter to ensure the success of the occasion. They are seen take to their heels into hiding from one entrance to the other, to indicate the essence of the ceremony. In preparation, a day prior to the public gathering for ritual atonement, people inside households listen attentively to the possible announcements that may be made by chief priest or any of the trained cult members proceedings among the Bassange, Nigeria includes:

- (a) Preparation involving decoration and repainting of houses, feasting, drumming and making essential announcements.
- (b) Preceding flogging sequence of anyone on road by the selected trained cult members
- (c) Assemblage of all persons at the village square; the stage image is around oval rectangular market arena.
- (d) Arrival of the chide priest, etsu (emir) and their entourages.
- (e) Magical displays
- (f) Recitation of chants in line with the characteristic dance step in secular and sacred forms.
- (g) Communion or withdrawal to the ancestral shrine for the offering of sacrifices.
- (h) Final jubilation, involving drumming, singing, dancing, drinking and eating.

On return from the sacred offering at the shrine, the chief priest in an intermittent serene voice, utters proverbial prayers while others hum

the fast rhythm that comes from the drum. The chief chanter amplifies and reaffirm traditional norms and values, which must be upheld for collective survival. The main purpose is to uphold communal wholeness, aspirations and individual sensibilities.

The ritual in the words of Ebong (1968:72) is therefore "multi functional multi-dimensional, multi-media and multi-expressional". The changer symbolizes his messages. Let us listen to these few line for instance:

Ike dab a elu boa
Zan doro ga danbo danbo
Wan be danbo bea
Besokoe, wo dea ye danba

Harmattan is gone, yet bird rejects farewell
Everyone will live, live, live
But will cease to live
Let me rush down there
For God sake, behave well

The bird (efu) is a salient aesthetic element used against cultural violence. It is versatile riverside agricultural avid. Man is likened to the bird, which only comes on temporary settlements on Bassange farmlands. The bird leaves the farms after harvest. The bird is a signifier of the cyclical nature of existence. It also symbolizes the temporal nature of human life. Man is presented as a short-lived being. The circle is man, society and transition. Hence, the adamanity of the bird is to show the continuity in the existence of the society in a collective renewal and of man's self in the celestial world. The peoples conception of the supernatural is divine and this is juxtaposed with early bad behaviour. The geographical inclination and the ecology of the society is reflected in the frequent choice of native metaphors nuances and symbols used in the rendition of the chants collated. The chants have diverse usages. Some parts are invocations, some proverbial warnings, prayers, donations, supplications and incantations praises.

Theatre as the Forum for Ritual Realization

The physical circumstance or the actual life context of any festival performance is a very crucial community activity. The stage reinforces the cultural reality of the ritual. The stage is therefore designed in such a way that the ritual performer can move away from, among and

between his audience. The performer's (ritual) steps, every movement and gestures are an organized preplanned repetitious effort broken up into levels, hummocks, slope for enhancing enactment. Stage lightening is controlled in other to establish various thematic dimensions. At times, it is a total blank visibility empty light. The Bassa native lamp is aimed at revealing functional effectiveness in the ritual process. The object therefore is perceived beyond its mere physical self. On stage, the practical deliverance of cultural raw materials is achieved. The physical presence of the audience is a theatrical feature that enhances the performer's ability. The performer speaks directly with intimacy. He/she speaks directly with his/her audience, interact and perfect communication. Hence, theatre pageantry makes performance a more realistic genre. The acting space should therefore be considered as a paramount contributory factor to the theme. This is because it is physical atmosphere that reflects the content of the ritual play. The props, for instance, the furniture which is one of the stage properties is arranged in such a way that is tightens the overall unity of the ritual proceeding and actions.

The ritual is fully an imitation of past actions, not men. It involves serious actions with theatrical accessories reflecting the natural setting of the people, adjusting to the human development and social change. An observant of this mode of performance can easily sense an air to pit for mankind and fear of the unseen. Man's fate is believed to be in custody of supernatural, hence, man must atone his misfortune through the performance of ritual rites. The observation is the Bassange community of Nigeria reveals the fact that there is full audience participation as each individual is involved in one way or the other in the ritual activities. Collectively, togetherness breeds the kind of communal harmony achieved by the setting.

The ritual proceedings in the Bassange market square used as the stage, involves the arrangement of the dramatic personae, changing of scenes, decorations, melodic accompaniment, dance steps, chants, chronological plotting and the use of appropriate props. Each scene has its own rhyme meant for the intensification of the ritual essence. The projection in the theatrical acts by the ritual performer is that of the futility and dichotomy in existence; the celestial and the terrestrial. In a further use of dramaturgy, familiar images of tree, fish trap, dog, pot, knife, frog, smoke, cat, camelion helps to draw a parallel between men

and the Bassa cosmological predetermining worldview. Examine these lines:

Kun dangi go noashigiaman
 Sell cat collect money buy camoleon
 Sokoe bagura shie yaye
 God does not cut fish bag before giving offers
 Tankpoloe lele paraa
 A frog does not sleep flat
 Na lanuwom gin esa dufe na
 One that uses water as seat
 Ebina nunan zo gwa sun
 Sharp knife is hard to handle

Words, Signs, appearance, repetitions, use of symbols are the multi-vocal and non-vocal devices on the theatre to strengthen the values and ethnic of the society ritualized. Both the visual forms and the verbal forms used on the theatre during Bassa ritual performance, aid the elaborateness and expressiveness of this theatrical aestheticism. The visual forms include the drums drummers, artifacts, costume, chant lines, music, dance, rhythmic movements gesticulations, gestures, use of talisman, signs, signals, strings, gong rattles, body painting, facial/chest drawings/marks, mime, masks, use of fingers, individual behaviour, stage instability, staff of office, hand fans movements, dust raising, claps fumes form gunshots all constitute the paralinguistic forms of the ritual act. There are about ten wooden drums carved from the three to the beaten by a single person- the chief priest known as *kangu* by the natives and its function is to accept cogent messages, there is usually response by the audience. Actualization is therefore heightened by the physical presence of the audience with whom the ritual performer speaks directly. The biggest drum is known as the gate. It is leathered with a goat-skin and made of hollow tree trunks usually round in nature. It is equivalent of the Nigeria Yoruba *Bembe*. It is the nerve centre- the xylophone. The talking drum, the *Kangu* is the Nigeria Hausa *Kanangu* drum, usually living around the shoulder and beaten from there. One of the ten drums is usually referred to as *Congo*, a name that is onomatopoeic to its curved structure. It is also beaten with a curved stick beater. It is these musical instruments that aid the spiritual control of the ritual atmosphere. The drums speak the language, the Bassange people understand. The ritual helps in maintaining collectiveness, eliminate disorder, guiding cultural values and projecting into the future despite the challenges of the global age.

Lynne (1986:150) is of relevance here in her conclusive statement that; "some of the delights that we got from oral poetry are from the musical quality that is contained in the songs or chants. Chants and songs are the main verbal forms used in the Bassange ritual activities. These two elements however contain other figures of speech and imageries such as hyperbole, rhetoric, aphorisms, proverbs, seasoned wits, philosophical sayings, appellations and symbols. In the use of these elements of language, it is noted that what is traditional still remains domineering and remarkably persistent. The elements are the weapons, which the poet chanter uses to depict historical and social circumstances needed for ritual fulfillment. This makes the theatrical ritual a mythopoetic piece. A few more lines of the chants affirm this:

Ekangi adua
 Ebe kuwa logbe
 Ena danbo
 Yeman elatu zuman o
 Thorns of prayers
 Pack snakes for hunting
 There is fire
 Use gauge to weigh your back

The chants are referred to as thorns of prayers because of the belief in the efficacy of their effectiveness. The people as mutual paratypes integrated through ritual actualization depict the supernatural and its subject. Through ritual process, different kinds of life have become fused in the image of serpent and fire. The two are scared elements of ritual used or presuppose the battle of renewal of collective self. The ritual performer reflects finally on history which he represents with the human back, he urges his brethren to wisely estimate the importance, desirability and influence of their past using a standard measure.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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All correspondence on the editorial and related matters should be addressed to:

The Editor,
The Abuja Communicator
Department of Theatre Arts,
University of Abuja.
P.M.B 117, Abuja
Federal Capital Territory,
Nigeria, West Africa.

E.S. DANDAURA
EDITOR