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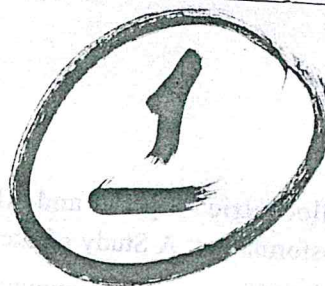


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AS PERFORMANCE: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF EZENWA-OHAETO'S *THE VOICE OF THE NIGHT MASQUERADE*

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Introduction

Performance is one of the platforms of transmitting poetry. The works of African poets whose roots and major sources of inspiration are deep in the African oral tradition, provide a rich source for research into the signs of the performance contexts of poetry. Performance is a significant and integral part of the oral tradition (Obafemi, 1994:30-44). Tanure Ojaide (in Bodunde, 2001:6) sees the performance quality of oral poetry as having a strong influence on the aesthetic quality of modern African poetry, more so since the modern poet is more likely to perform his poetry. Bodunde (2001: 2) says the use of the African orature as an aesthetic means by the African writer is not only reflective of the processes and movement of decolonization but is also a sign of the writer's recognition of the functions of verbal art in society. Epscamp (1995:17-18) describes the spoken word as being more explicit than the written, stressing that one of the aims of the 'performance' of the word is the creation of a context for co-operative thinking and action. Therefore, for written poetry to have its desired impact, it needs to be read out aloud, indeed performed to a live audience. Ododo (2001:4) alludes the stately formality, in rendition, of the poetic verse in Greek tragedy to this desire.

Performance here however transcends mere 'reading aloud'. MacLean (1988:7), Hawkes (1977:125), Finnegan (1976:3), and Epscamp (1992:10) all maintain that performance includes other elements such as facial expression, gesture, music, dance, songs, clothing, hairstyle, perfume, accent, social context, etc.

Semiotics

The paper adopts to some extent the views of the two founding fathers of semiotics Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 - 1913)

and American Philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 - 1914)¹.

Saussure's major contribution to semiotics is his ideas on the nature of the linguistic sign (Riffaterre 1978:18 and Eco 1976:14-15). Saussure says the sign is dual in nature comprising concept and a sound pattern². While the sound pattern refers to the hearer's psychological impression of a sound, it is distinguished from other elements associated with it which Saussure calls 'concept' (cited in Lodge (ed.) 1988:10) The relationship between these two - signifier (sound pattern) and signified (concept) is therefore arbitrary. For example in Saussurean linguistics, there is no connection between the idea of a tree and its English sequence of sounds as the same idea can be represented by other sounds. Rather, it is the rules of the English language (convention) which signify that the sound of 'tree' refers to the concept of a tree.

Of Saussure's other views and Peirce's thoughts on semiotics, Peirce's definition and classification of the sign is however considered more useful to the analysis of literary products which are considered to have functional values, of which African literature is one (Eco 1976:15-16, Eagleton 1983:116, Hawkes 1977:130, Alabi 1995:17, and Oloruntoba-Oju 1999:158-159).

According to Peirce, a sign or representamen is something (object) which stands to somebody for something (interpretant) in some respect (ground). Each of these three terms - object, interpretant, ground - can only be understood in relation to each other and it is the different relationships possible between the sign, its objects, interpretant and ground which Peirce says constitute the process of semeiosis.

Pierce says the various relationships between the sign, its object and ground occur in the mind of the interpretant in three different kinds of triadic structures or dichotomies. The first is the triadic relation of comparison or logical possibilities which includes the qualisign, the sinsign and the legisign. The second is that of performance namely the icon, index and symbol. The third triadic relation, that of thought, is made up of the immediate, the dynamic and the argument. These three dichotomies were later expanded to yield ten classes of signs, the combination of which yielded sixty-three other classes. The initial three trichotomies are however of significance to our study and are elaborated upon below

The first is the set of relations based on the kind of ground of which there are three. There is the qualisign, the sinsign and the legisign.

The second set of relations is that which is based on the object. There are two of this set: i) dynamic and ii) immediate or passive objects. The relation between the sign and the dynamic objects which produces the icon, index and symbol is what Peirce sees as the frame work for the existence of knowledge.

The third dichotomy is that of the interpretant or of thought which are the immediate or explicit, the dynamic or effective and the final.

The immediate interpretant contains in its object explicit qualities or information. Three types of the immediate interpretant are stated by Peirce. These are the hypothetical which is the possible resemblance between the interpretant and the qualities or characteristics of the sign; the categorical which is the information contained in the sign and which can be applied to a real object or event; and the relative which is a law. The dynamic interpretant refers to the semiotic effect produced by a sign for its object. This is also further divided into three. The emotional dynamic interpretant which is the qualitative semiotic effects of a sign; the energetic which refers to either a muscular encounter with the outside world or the manipulation and exploration of the images of our inner world and the logical dynamic interpretant which is the concept produced by a sign. The final interpretant refers to the effect the sign would produce if it fulfils the purpose for which it was meant. One of these purposes will be to produce an aesthetic effect which is called gratific; the second has to do with a change in conduct and this is called ethical or practical; the third purpose is the deliberate production of critical (logical) control over habits and beliefs which is called the pragmatistic final interpretant.

Obafemi (1994:37-38) defines context as the situation in which dramatic action takes place and aligns himself with the views of the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin when he affirms that in employing semiotics as a centric discourse mode, context is a macro sign. Going by our earlier statement that African literary artists source their fictive materials from their environment and our belief in the functional status of literature, any semiotic analysis which does not acknowledge the role of the context would have been fruitless.

Our observations in this paper are based on two points as highlighted by Sekoni (1988:47). The first is that man's capacity for discussing his community and himself through the creation and examination of a fictive world is based on or abstracted from his real world. The second is that oral poetry is not recognized as an individual art

form but a collective artistic experience that is performed and shared with an abiding communal spirit.

The thematic concern of the collection of poetry under study-Ezenwa Ohaeto's *The Voice of the Night Masquerade* (1996)³ here center on the evils in his society. From the word "masquerade" contained in the title of Ezenwa Ohaeto's *The Voice of the Night Masquerade*, from the author's comment in the 'proword' (p.8), and the passage from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in Section One the theme of the collection of poems is obvious. In the African culture, the masquerade visits at a time "when abominations become unbearable; when the truth must be told with great courage... in order to set a senseless practice right" p.8. Its appearance at such times commands fearful attention from all the members of the community although it is hoped that its appearance would bring about a change for the better. Romanus Egudu (in Bodunde, 2001:74) defines the functions of the masquerade as:

Advising the living on socio-political justice and moral rectitude as well as revealing and correcting the secret vices of the mischievous members of the society.

Ohaeto's work can therefore be classified under what has been referred to as Emergent Tradition (Amuta, 1989:119 and 167 and Ododo, 2004:63-69. The main feature of works under this category is the foregrounding of issues concerning the oppressed underprivileged class using the Marxian and Engelian dialectical materialist theory by employing oral traditional forms as aesthetics. The correction of the ills of the society is a duty which Okpewho (1985:20) considers as one of the most useful duties that can be performed by a poet. We thus feel justified in pursuing one of the many methods through which the aims of the poet is achieved, that is, performance.

Some of the signs of performance to be explained below will appeal more to our imagination. Epscamp (1995:55) says that the icons and indexes in a narrative experience are understood through the conventions of performance while Ododo (2001:6) insists that, "they are there and can be pictured in our mind's eye".

Signs of Performance in *The Masquerade*

(1) Qualisigns of Performance

The qualisign is a quality of the sign which it shares with its object, all other characteristics of the sign being irrelevant. An example is

the colour of a colour chip on a painting which is used to identify the paint in the tin. Qualisigns are manifested in icons. The icon functions as a sign as a result of its resemblance to its subject. For instance, a painting which resembles its subject will be said to have an iconic relationship to it. According to Keir Elam (1980:62-63), for Peirce's iconism to be useful in theatre/ performance, two qualifications have to be borne in mind. The first is that the principle of similitude is highly flexible and strictly founded on convention. The second is that the similarity is not a simple one-to one relationship between analogous objects but a relationship necessarily mediated by the concept. Thus a sign can be said to have fulfilled an iconic function when it allows the spectator to form an image or likeness of the represented object. Pierce however stresses that the relationship between this second set of trichotomy of icon, index and symbol are not mutually exclusive. Thus, it is possible to have iconic symbols or symbolic iconic symbols or symbolic icons; it is the context in which a sign is used which determines its ultimate characteristic.

Pierce further subdivided the icon into three-namely, the image, the diagram and the metaphor, which are evaluated through the emotional dynamic interpretant.

(a) Diagrams of Performance

The iconic diagram is a sign which shows a structural similitude with its object. Alabi (1995:65) interpretes the iconic diagrammatic sign to mean structure or shape. For our purpose the structures of the poems as presented on paper including some linguistic markers, exude semiotic readings of performance. These are represented by

(i) indentation (ii) dash. Their uses in the collection of poems can be taken as representations of the call-and-response mode of performance or what Bodunde (2001:25) calls the 'voice and chorus technique'. These levels of dialogue could be between two narrators alone or between one narrator and his musicians/dancers/singers or the spectators/audience

(i) Indentation

The indentation of certain lines gives the picture of a dialogue between two (sets of) people. For instance in 'Raise a chant for me' (*The Masquerade*: 16) after the directive:

Raise a chant for me

Raise a chant for me

Can you cast a spell

Can you cast a spell
If you are not a spirit
Can you cast a spell.

This pattern is repeated throughout the poem. Other examples in *The Masquerade* include 'The mouth of the night' (p.25); 'Night of Funerals' (p.29); 'Each night one fled' (p.34); 'The chant is the escort' (p.38); 'A harvest too soon' (p.44); 'The laughter of the stream' (p.53); 'A dance of doddering deities' (p.67); 'A crowd of other dances' (p.70); 'The dancing bee is about to sting' (p.73); and 'The fading chant' (p.94).

[ii] Dash

We also contend that the dash (-) as it occurs in some of the poems of the collection is an iconic diagram of performance. This is manifested in 'A call at dusk' (p.12); 'The chant is the escort' (p.38); 'The living and the dead' (p.41); 'The chant goes on' (p.58); 'A crowd of other dances' (p.70); 'The dancing bee is about to sting' (p.73); and 'The fading chant' (p.94). The dash as it occurs at the end of these poems is an iconic diagram indicating that although the masquerade may have ceased talking/chanting, other elements of the performance such as the dancing and the music continue. This is more so when one recollects that in African culture, even as the masquerade talks/chants, there is some form of music, usually understated, to accompany his words and movements. 'A call at dusk' (p.12), for instance, is an invocation of the masquerade from the spirit world. The repetition of 'call' indicates this. The second part of the poem is the climax of the incantation which finally leads to the appearance of the masquerade. This appearance is followed by words of praises to the masquerade before the caller says/sings:

The masquerade is out

The dash here serves as an iconic diagram signifying that there is a continuation and perhaps, a rise in tempo of the music (flute and drums) including the dance. This would serve as a welcome to the masquerade that would also be expected to join in the dance.

In 'A crowd of other dances' (p.70) the repetition of the word 'dance' especially in the last two verses not only imparts some musical quality to the tone of the masquerade's speech, it impresses on the mind of the reader, the picture of an intensity in the dance (although the reader also realizes that there is a deeper meaning to the word). The masquerade's last

line in that poem is a form of directive that the 'bees' (i.e. dancers or a new set of leaders) be given the chance to demonstrate their own dance steps. The dash which ends the line is an iconic diagrammatic sign that the performance continues, with the 'bees' (i.e. another set of dancers or leaders) now in position:

Dance dance dance with care
Who are the dancers?
What is the dance?

Dance, dance dance with care

The bees are coming for a dance
Give them the arena-

According to Epscamp (1995:45) it is incumbent on the storyteller to 'guide his audience by punctuating his performance with dramatic pauses; emphatic expressions, tone variations and the accents or dialects he uses'. He adds that this is achievable in the written text through the exploration of the punctuation.

(b) Images of Performance

Taking our bearing from Alabi (1995:77) we adopt the 'word' as iconic image when it signifies vivid descriptions of visual objects and scenes.

(i) The masquerade is the central figure of Ohaeto's collection. This is evident even from the title of the collection. In African culture, the masquerade is perceived to be the spirit of the ancestors of the community whose visits and blessings are necessary for the continual survival of the community. Thus, the past, present and future become one whole. Although a description of the masquerade is not offered, we take what Bodunde (2001:83) refers to as the 'verbal instruments of social regulation' as an iconic image of performance. The masquerade speaks in a heightened form of language, different from the ordinary speech of daily discourse. Thus the masquerade's speech in Ohaeto's collection which is laced with proverbs is taken, as a whole, as an image of performance.

(ii) Although everyone knows that the masquerades are actually men (and sometimes women) in costumes, masks, and sometimes without masks (Ododo 2004), their appearances are always an event to celebrate.

They are usually accompanied by musicians, singers, and in some cases, members of the community as they go about chanting praises, warnings, and blessings. The masquerade in Ohaeto's performance collection uses words which are iconic images of performance. These include 'dance', 'chant', 'call', 'song', 'voice', 'flute', 'drums', and "public square", which occur throughout the collection. These words further impress on the reader's mind, the image of performance.

(iii) The masquerade further enhances the image of performance through his description of dances and dance-steps, and musical instruments. The masquerade 'In the arena of dances', says:

In the arena of changing dancers
Sway the hips of the dancers (p.66)

Also in 'A crowd of other dancers' (p.70), a description of a crowded dance floor is given while towards the end of this same poem, a description of the frenzy in the dance is provided through the repetition of the word 'dance'.

Descriptions of the dancing styles of some masquerades are also given in the dance is calling' (p.52).

(iv) Another iconic image of performance is that of the description of the sounds created by some musical instruments. This in turn, creates an atmosphere of performance. For instance in "The dance is calling" the masquerade says:

Flutes and drums weave rhythms

The arena has come alive

While urging that:

You must listen to the drum
he throws out the invitation:

The king of drums is beating
The Ikoro beckons us to the arena (p.62)

(c) **Metaphors of Performance**

The iconic metaphor involves an interaction between a system of things (principal and subsidiary) wherein some characteristics of the subsidiary are applied to the principal. Alabi (1995: 85) borrowing from Max Black rejects the comparison and substitution theories of the metaphor for the

interaction theory. In the interaction theory of metaphor, the two subjects- the principal and the subsidiary- are the system of relationships and associations through which the ground of the metaphor is located. In Peirce's theory of semiotics, this is achieved on the basis of similarity between the constituent meanings which takes place in real-world situations. For our purpose, we intend to show how some of the poems are metaphors of performance through their similarities with some techniques of performance.

[i] The *Masquerade* reads like a two-act performance. It opens with 'A call at dusk' that can be referred to as the introduction to the main performance. It is an incantatory poem meant to invoke the masquerade out from the anthole. This is observed in the frenzy with which the masquerade is called.

Thus, *The Masquerade* presents us with two different actors/narrators/voices- the one who calls out the masquerade and then retires for the second voice/narrator (the night masquerade) who takes up from 'Raising a chant' (p. 16) to the end.

(ii) 'A dance of doddering deities' (p.67) is an iconic metaphor of performance as it evokes images of the performance of the heroic-poetry mode of presentation. The Oriki or heroic poetry usually contains exaggerated achievements of the capabilities of the person or object being praised. In our example, the ruler is satirically referred to as:

the python that owns the forest
the leopard that wills all will
the panther that ever prowls.

You are éclipse

Blanketing the land's wealth
You are night

Enveloping the land's hopes. (p.67)

(iii) We also see the organization of the poems in *The Masquerade* as an iconic metaphor of the rounds the masquerade would make in the community while performing. The poems under the titles 'A chant for the dead' (pp 43-49) and 'Songs for the living' (pp 50-55) signify brief stops at the different family compounds of the people to whom the poems are

dedicated.

(2). Sinsigns of Performance

The sinsign is an actual thing or event which acts simply and singly as a sign. For example, a clue from an object to determine another object is a sinsign. The relationship between a sinsign and its objects (index) is of a sequential or causal kind. A knock on the door, for example, points to the presence of somebody at the door. The sinsigns of performance in the poems under study are detected through the immediate categorical interpretant. The semiotic effect produced is the energetic dynamic interpretant which for this purpose is a manipulation and exploration of the images of the mind.

- (i) The title of Ohaeto's collection and his replication of the 'I' mode of the narrator in an oral performance are sinsigns of performance (Bodunde 2001:77). The occurrence of the first person (singular) pronoun is thus an index of performance. This image is further reinforced by the title of the collection. So rather than the poet's, it is the voice of the masquerade that is imagined.
- (ii) The Yoruba and Ibo expressions contained in some of the 'praise poems' of Ezenwa's collection of poems further indexicate performance. These include 'Baba ke' and Agwu nwoke which occur three times in 'A dance of doddering deities' (p.67). These indexicate gestures because uttering them during a performance would necessitate the raising of a fist in mid-air as they are praise-words/tittles. Such words are therefore always uttered with such gestures which signify respect.
- (iii) There are sinsigns of performance indexing music which can be either instrumental or non-instrumental (vocal or tonal) in the collection of poems. The musical instruments in many of the poems of *The Masquerade* are indices of their presence in a performance. This is equally true of the titles of some of the poems as they indicate that they are to be sung. Examples are 'The chant is the escort' (p.62); 'Songs for the living' (p. 50); and 'Raising a chant' (p.16).
- (iv) Repetition is a sign of performance when it occurs in the collection of poems. The repeated lines when they occur are indices of refrains to be sung or recited by the audience in the call-and-response mode. In 'Raising a chant' (p.16) the repetition of the line 'Raise a chant for

me' before the subsequent indented lines indexicates that the following (indented) lines are the chorus. Other such instances are the repetition of 'Abali di egwu' in 'The mouth of the Night' (p.25); the repetition of the various forms of the question 'where is the dancer? /what is the dance' at the end of each verse of 'In the arena of dances' (p.66) and the lines 'Goes at night/comes at night in 'The chant goes on' (p.58).

- (v) The replication of another style of heroic poetry, in this case the reciter's self-praise in *The Masquerade* is yet another sinsign of performance. According to Ogunba (1975: 855), oriki or heroic poetry provides "the greatest scope for performance ingenuity". 'Raising a chant' (p.16) and 'A chant at the anthole' (p.91) manifest this style with their self-praise (or boastful) nature coupled with the repetition of the first person (singular) pronoun which indexicates the gesture of an emphatic beating of the chest with the palm and most likely a proud gait to go with it.

(3). Legisigns of Performance

The legisign is related to the symbol not through any physical resemblance but through a law, rule or habit. Thus the relationship here is arbitrary, as is seen in language where the meaning of an utterance (sign) is determined by the interpretant through the structure or rules of the language in which it occurs. Therefore, language, laws and regularities or behaviours, convention and customs, both individual and social are examples of legisigns. This means that archetypes can also be legisigns (Alabi: 1995:115). The immediate relative and the logical dynamic interpretants which is the thought, concept or understanding generated by the sign induce the legisigns of performance identified in the two collections of poetry.

(i) The masquerade's appearance in African socio-cultural milieu is always an event to celebrate as he is accompanied by musicians, dancers, singers and sometimes members of the community (Ododo: 2004:34). The masquerade who is the central figure of Ohaeto's *The Masquerade* is therefore a symbol of performance. Being the central figure, it becomes expedient that the images which the words create should enhance the atmosphere of performance as has been shown from the analysis of the qualisigns and sinsigns of performance.

(ii) The adaptation of folksongs and nursery rhymes is yet another legisign of performance in Ohaeto's collection of poems. Here, there are

adaptations of two English nursery rhymes which have been internalized into the Nigerian culture through formal education. These are "There is fire on the mountain" and "London bridge is falling down" in 'Night of Funerals' (p.29). The songs have become a part of the collective experience of the people, thus the audience would need no invitation from the narrator before it joins in. Thus the full and active participation of the audience, a vital element of an oral performance, is ensured.

Values of the Signs of Performance

The elements of performance explored in Ohaeto's *The Masquerade* include narration, gestures by the narrator(s) and audience, audience participation, dance, song, music and role-playing. We situated our analysis within the Nigerian (and African) socio-cultural milieu.

Gestures including eye and facial expressions in an oral performance concretize the issue being discussed and give a visual dimension and colour to the story or poem (Abah 1994:86, Episcamp 1992:69-70, 1995:45). These serve the first purpose of entertaining the audience. Beyond these, however, is the need to attract the audience using Slanguage, gestures, voice and a good organization of the story (Sekoni 1990:141). Kraus and Chapman (1981:16) stress that the communicative value of a movement must be considered in arriving at a definition of dance while Finnegan (1970:5) says the elements of dance in which both the performer and the audience partake in, enhances the aesthetic effectiveness of the performance. Repetition of lines in the two collections of poems was identified as being indexical to the presence of songs and music. This would eliminate boredom, create excitement and lead to audience-participation (Bodunde 2001:131 and Ododo 2004:88).

It is therefore our contention that the signs of performance we have identified in our analysis are meant to engage the reader's attention but not merely for entertainment alone. Amuta (1989:105-106) says non-alignment for an artist (especially the African artist) is an impossible position. He espouses the idea that the writer's commitment must be defined by the challenges of life in the society. This is achievable in literature through a conscientization of the people, a reawakening of their spirits so that they can collectively transform their society by themselves. This is the ultimate concern of Ohaeto in his *The Masquerade*.

Thus the thought concept or general understanding (the logical dynamic interpretant) produced by the signs of performance identified in

the collection of poetry would be gratific, because they are entertaining and pleasing, ethical and pragmatistic because they aim to urge the reader/audience/participant to change the inglorious habits, beliefs and ills of the society.

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to fish out the elements of oral tradition contained in Ezenwa Ohaeto's *The Voice of a Night Masquerade*. It applied Charles Sanders Peirce's thoughts on semiotics. The immediate hypothetical interpretant was used to explain our understanding of qualisigns of performance. In exploring the sinsigns of performance, we pointed out the information contained in the signs and how these suggest performance while in our discussion of the symbols of performance we looked at how societal conventions have imbued the symbols with semiotic readings.

The values of the signs were then examined and it was concluded that they are both for entertaining and for reforming, which should be the ultimate aim of any artist living in the society painted by Ohaeto.

- NOTES
1. Explanations on Saussure and Peirce's Semiotics are sourced from Hawkes 1977 and Alabi 1995).
 2. Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju however posits that the distinction between the terms 'signifier' and signified is being wrongly credited to Saussure, asserting that the distinction is an ancient one, traceable to classical times. (See Oloruntoba-Oju in Adegbija (ed) 1999:159-161).
 3. The book is hereafter abbreviated to *The Masquerade* and all further page references are cited immediately after titles of poems in the collection and after quotations.

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