

Beyond Aesthetics: Indigenous Festivals in the Age of Internet

SEGUN OMOSULE

Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago Iwoye, Nigeria

Abstract. The wave of digital spread in relation to festivals especially masquerades across the world may be the genesis of an emerging culture. It is not outlandish for viewers to be fascinated with such performances. Dwelling on the strength of the claim by Asha, et al (41) especially the claim on “myth as producer of culture”, it is not out of place that new myth may be fashioned particularly one that gives strength to the emergence of masquerades in the new world where the digital invasion is rife. This is because there is no point in time that new myths cannot be generated. It is equally true that the proponents of myths may not be conscious of the fact that they are engendering new myths at the outset but time and conscious devotion to the tenets of the new culture may enliven such myths to the point that they confer potency on the new practices. With the aid of aesthetics as a theoretical standpoint, the paper concludes that what was earlier restricted in terms of locale and audience may have become globalised with the aid of the digital breakthrough.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Indigenous, Masquerades, Internet bound, Performance

1. Background

The quest for aesthetic fulfilment may be the singular goal of the crowd that throngs every arena during the annual performances of the festivals. However, the crave in modern times may be propelled by other considerations. Aesthetics, which philosophers situate within the

quest for beauty, may be a driving force in the intention to stage a movie or attend an indigenous performance. Questions that preoccupied the mind of Sibley in 1959 about the properties of aesthetics as cited in Goldman (256) may not be totally geared towards fulfilling such qualities especially in the age of Internet. A short script of about five minutes may be all a blogger needs to pull the crowd and earn good money. Salient properties of a script “being balanced, serene, powerful, delicate, sentimental, graceful and garish” may inhabit such a short performance that they may achieve Kant’s “characterization of aesthetic experience” such as the influence on the “perceptual, cognitive, and affective” capacity of the beholder (Goldman 262).

The lure of aptness and shortness of the scripts may have conditioned the choice of what to post on the Internet. This may be due partly to the need to maximize time which calls for brevity of time and promptness of action if the script must be considered engaging enough to draw the needed traffic. Not only that, the segments on rituals and other preliminary stages prelude to the actual performance may have to be expunged as the data to be expended must be limited, just as the energy, in terms of electricity supply, needed to behold the spectacle must be considered especially in the third world countries where ready energy may not be available while the pleasure to be derived must be worthy of the effort. A masquerade performance that is compelling and adjudged

aesthetically meaningful may not be lengthy as to take more than ten minutes. Of course, such long scripts may not be popular except ample proofs are latent in them to arrest the attention of the audience for that long and definitely not such as would take a whole day as witnessed in the real indigenous settings.

The setting of an erstwhile indigenous performance, taken as a singular whole, is vast in the age of Internet. It may not be limited by geographical barriers. The whole cyberspace is involved and devoid of any definite stage. The original stage is superimposed on every space provided by the unlimited private space of every phone or computer. The viewers' spanning different continents constitute the active audience just as the live performance assumes a global stage. The supposed owner may not be instrumental in the composition of the script. It is a communal property but the influence of the Internet may have reduced such scripts to be the exclusive property of the first, smart blogger to post it online. Even when he may have no input in the composition and staging, the opportunity to post it online places the ownership on him. The original owners are obscure; and references may not be made to the origin of such scripts.

2. Concepts and Definitions

Masquerades are comic personalities that perform during indigenous festivals. They are artistic characters whose roles are the entertainment of the people. They are mainly masculine and may represent both male and female personalities. The costumes as well as the mask are indistinguishable from each other. The costumes embody the hoses that cover the feet as well as the jingling-bell (aja) that serves as the symbol of authority of the masquerade. The dance steps are no doubt very interesting as they depict the true identities of the masquerades. The language is esoteric and poetic. It is carefully crafted that they cannot but amuse listeners. The language has spiritual potency and may be instrumental in healing and could be used against one another during conflicts at the arena.

Festivals are hinged upon some demonstrable

and mutually compatible movements, gestures, and codes that are culturally and linguistically fundamental to the deconstruction of the underlying messages. They are periodic performances that combine the twin desire for entertainment with the achievement of cultural sensitization through the cleverly scripted segments that appeal to the visual, sensuous and rational capabilities of the audience. Through these, cohesion may be achieved in the societies and the visions of the founding fathers fulfilled. These explain why festivals may remain relevant and indispensable even in the age of Internet. The growing popularity has a tendency towards tilting in the realm of carnivals.

The language of performance, even when it may not be interpreted, may not be important. This is because the display may be considered superior to other considerations as the quest for traffic and the corresponding money that may be garnered therefrom are the propelling drives. These spurs are motivating factors in featuring masquerades in the Internet that the fear of extinction in relation to indigenous performances may have been allayed. This is true in view of the Internet's application that has the capability of interpreting world languages, even when they are not perfectly interpreted, but basic insights may be all the audience needs to grasp the import of every performance.

Beardsley (1958) defines human behaviours as conscious endeavours capable of affecting the knowledge of the listeners in two definite ways, by informing and conditioning them through "cognitive import" and "emotive import" (Beardsley 116 - 7). The performance of indigenous festivals, for example, has a potentiality for establishing the institution of monarchy and placing it as a divine arrangement to which any voice of dissent should not be raised. Therefore, the performance of the hegemonic festival is an artistic imperative while equally emphasising the propagandist desires of the ruling class. Such festivals are: Olojo at Ile-Ife, Odun Iwemo at Ado Ekiti, Agbaasin at Isanlu Isin, Lijeebu at Ile Oluji, Oloku at Okuku, Oba Odoro at Tede near Saki, Ebo Ade at Ifon, Osun and a host of others.

Aesthetics falls within mimesis which Janaway (2006) defines as “impersonation or dramatic characterization” (Janaway 4). Mimesis in relation to indigenous performances may be taken to be representation which is what every dramatic performance is. Imputed to Plato as cited in Janaway (2006), therefore, the poet or the character as the case may be in festivals is far from what Plato considers him to be in his category of mimesis. The character is far from parading his voice. Of course, the voice cannot be located in time and space. It is that of the communal spirit that no one can identify. Consequently, the character may not “speak in his own voice” and even where he wears a mask, the language is far from his and may not have any contribution to the language of the performance apart from the display he exhibits at the arena. The characters are visible and do not pretend to speak their own language. What may not be denied in mimesis is the presence of “impersonation or dramatic characterisation”. The poet does not hide himself as claimed by Plato. The fact of impersonation cannot be denied as it refers to the act of “making oneself resemble some character, cause one to become like such a person in real life” (Janaway, 4-5).

3. Application/Analysis

The relevance of indigenous festivals has not ceased to occupy the front burner in any discussion of verbal art. This is not out of place in view of the overwhelming influence of the Internet in a global society that has succeeded in revolutionizing the place of relationship in the age of Information and Communication Technology. Every home is, no doubt, attached to the global network in one way or the other. This is true in the sense that information is easily disseminated from the farthest angle of the universe to the high brow cities of the world with the speed of light. The swiftness of information dissemination may make one conclude that the dream of the concept of a global village, initiated in the latter part of the twentieth century and brought to a blooming extent in the earlier part of the twenty first century, is a fait accompli.

No doubt, indigenous scripts will continue to be

relevant. The Internet may further enhance their popularity and thereby brought to the reach of lovers of art that were hitherto precluded from the rave originally limited to indigenous people in the great recesses of the world. Time which was said to have left them behind has taken a dive to these secluded places and their artistic performances are savoured with relish; as fresh, beautiful and entertaining in the digital age all over the world.

Yeku (2017) identifies the nature of indigenous performances in the Yoruba world that makes them amenable to “digitalization” which of course, “deritualizes mask narratives” (Yeku 207). What may have been considered rituals and thus meant to serve local needs have found their ways into the Internet. The reason is situated within the fact that the “structure of much of African performance practices exhibits a lot of multimedia attributes which justify a reconstitution of mask technology on a hypertext medium like the Internet” (Yeku 208). Apart from the amenable nature of indigenous performances to exhibition on the Internet, economic drive and the need to outpace other bloggers may have informed the renewed interest of folks in festivals in the digital age.

The growing interest in harnessing whatever potential wealth might be inherent in the YouTube is the propelling force. In the age of widespread and alarming rate of unemployment, creativity has engendered what may be termed net inclined businesses. This is a reference to the growing interest in whatever form of capital that may be garnered from the Internet driven by the quest for survival and self-sustainability which one may rightly tag: Internet-preneurial engagements subsisting through available windows of opportunities in the age of the Internet. Consequently, the drive tends towards exploring any area of interest that may generate traffics to self-sustaining blogs, YouTube, specialized websites and others that may serve as means of income to their founders.

4. The Growing Relevance of Indigenous Art

It is not unexpected that what did not reach the

views of the global communities prior to the advent of the blossoming Internet are novel scripts that may draw large followership and viewers and the resultant income therefrom in the modern times. The scripts delight audience who may draw inspiration therefrom about the universality of creative capability. The various reasons for this may not be detached from the growing awareness that no single culture may be considered superior to others. The fact remains that indigenous culture in some hitherto unknown climes might be all one needs to relieve the tension arising from a hard day work.

Constituting special interest to viewers are erotic segments and these are not wanting during Boabo festival at Igbobini and Iweh cleansing feast at Ugbotu. What may be termed a pagan culture is now a subject of entertainment to Christians and Muslims. The religious restriction that negates their being performed in Christian communities may have been debunked as desire for pleasure may not be tied to any prohibition; especially with the subtle invasion of the homes and adherents and non-adherents alike. The relative importance may be considered by the interest of Prince Harry in the entertainment of the masquerade at Brimstone Hill. Even when masquerades may not need the interest of a prince to ascertain its inimitable importance, the presence in such a gathering attests to the fact that the performances of masquerades during festivals may not be limited to an environment. Similar festivals of cleansing may be found in other cultural environments such as Edi at Ile-Ife, Uwen at Ode Aye, Aluma at Erinje, Agbo at Agbowa, Odun Moko at Ondo, Agemo in Ijebu towns and villages, Aworo-Ose in Ila Orangun, Adamu Orisa in Lagos and a host of others.

Indigenous festivals are vehicles for transmitting information. This information may include the roles of the monarchs and the responsibilities of the folks in maintaining peace and harmony. They are embedded with the philosophical and cultural imperatives in these societies. These may find expression in the values that the societies would like to sustain and the negative imperatives that they would not tolerate. Through festivals, continuity of moral and cultural charters may be achieved and adherence

to cultural values is enhanced except in the rare cases of performances that may take many decades to be performed and for which qualification may be difficult to achieve. Since the goal of every festival is the achievement of specific artistic goals, the ingenuity of sages may be unearthed here especially the ability to cleverly tuck in the needs of the ruling body in art. Olofungbogho in Ode Irele harbours such script that reminds the monarch of his eventual demise and his role as the scapegoat to the larger society.

Some agrarian and societal problems may be solved through performances at the arenas. Such specific needs usually determine the attraction of folks during festivals as they have been recorded to be latent with therapeutic capability. The sick are given the benefit of instant healings and barren women are blessed with the seeds of the womb. The spiraling economic activities at the arenas may be insignificant to what obtains online through advertisement, financial gains from traffics etc. It is, therefore, imperative that the quest is channelled through art. Art becomes a memory and vehicle through which such quests may be stored, retrieved and activated during the festive seasons. The goals range from monarchical to cleansing cum purification. Usually, every lofty goal is accompanied with cleansing especially with the knowledge that various unforeseen circumstances could truncate the annual celebrations of the monarch, new yam festival and other communal oriented performances.

Entertainment is the primary propelling machinery. This is so because it is the only means through which the memory of the community could be retrieved from its redundant form and brought to the knowledge of the younger generation who may be attending the performances for the first time and to who such might have been directed at the outset in the quest for sensitization, moderation, regeneration and perpetuation of the moral cum ethical ethos of the milieu. Festival is a limitless performative vehicle of socio-cultural unification of art and sociological undercurrents whose objective is the twin desire for entertainment and other sociological imperatives

in the milieu.

The performances of Odun Oba at Ondo and Olofunboghho at Ode Irele, for instance, are practical quests by indigenous societies for the arrogation of reverence to royalty amid the emphasis on rituals, royal obligations, artistic amplification through communal convergence and periodic conviviality. Within the presentation of the indispensability of monarchy, which is an emphasis on indigenous structural hierarchies, the attainment of unity among the rank and file, the devolution of justice to the divergent forces that threaten cohesion are achieved through indigenous creative energy. These desires are channelled towards magnifying the monarchs' image by equating them with phenomenal gods for who reverence is a matter of fact. Ogunba (1991) is a potent reference point.

The participating audience is consequently sensitised about the relevance of monarchs to societal growth and the entrenchment of tradition. The singular charter in the maintenance of awe for monarchs becomes pronounced through the attendant rituals to the gods and the ancestors as well as the centrality of the monarchs in the festivals. This ritual sums up the multiple roles that festivals perform by entertaining and equally subjecting the royal personalities to an oath of honesty, justice and fair-play in consonance with the primordial parallel. It equally conditions the audience to be loyal to the royal personage as peace in the kingdom is synonymous with peace in individual homes. Attempts are, therefore, made to protect the monarch from any form of insult even when he is paradoxically the direction of every insult in the land. It is not out of place for wives of relations to direct their curses at the monarch without reprisal from anyone. The implication is that the monarch is the large heart whose head accepts both good and bad.

Olofunboghho is a hegemonic performance that accelerates prosperity and spiritual favour for the royal households and the subjects generally. The symbol of the scapegoat compels the monarch to a periodic reflection about the inevitability of death, desire for harmony in the

kingdom and the imperative of monarchical succession. It is synonymous with a transition ritual. The periodic performances of transition rites for the Olofun of Irele, for instance, represents a reminder of the inevitability of death while fulfilling the dual objectives of worship and the registration of the impermanence of positions within the artistic dynamism of the milieu. Therefore, indigenous art is a combination of approbation and negation of royalty. This innate paradoxical dynamism is enforced amid periodic freedom of speech attainable through performance.

The rites of transition are checks and balances subsisting in indigenous cultures for the achievement of cohesion and continuity. This performative obligation equally cleanses the land through the balm of concoctions sprinkled on the audience. The tragic ritual finding expression in the Oluwen carrier sums up the people's desire to purify themselves and the land. This is the tragic hero who is a symbol of the sins of the land. He submits himself to the task of cleansing the land of its accumulated sins annually. The cultural requirement makes it mandatory to offer some mouth-watering benefits which are hardly fulfilled.

The elevation of the monarchs and the ritual purification of the land people are brought to the fore through convergence at the arena. The appearance of the monarchs at the arena represents a form of psychological sanction of the periodic conviviality. The inherent entertainment is the primary vehicle with which the crowd is motivated. It is the original script that must be re-enacted periodically in order to carry everyone in the land along in the artistic regeneration of the land. Thus, the interplay of the entertainment and psychological conditioning of the participating audience results in communal cohesion. The ritual load conveyed by Oluwen during Olofunboghho fulfils significant aesthetic objectives as meaning is co-referentially tied to linguistic and scenic peculiarities.

Consequently, the Oluwen typifies the redemption bid. He is a scapegoat that displays uncanny selflessness and innocence for which

the monarch is equally synonymous just as the transition rites symbolise a prick on the conscience of monarchs to be truthful in their performance of indigenous functions. The periodic delight from the staging of Olofungbogho even when devoid of a narrative, within the minimal linguistic employment is enhanced through other communicative ingredients harboured by the various movements and the underlying messages surrounding the ritual movements of the Oluwen towards the "akoko" tree thrice. The white costumes associated with Oluwen connote purity. Every member of the audience is familiar with the semiotics of these ritual messages and codes. The Oluwen represents the primordial character whose sacrifice ensured continuity through the cultivation of the highest ideal in conformity with the moral codes of the founding fathers.

The forward movement lends expression to the belief that sacrifices are not only directed at the moment but the future; as a significant determinant of growth which depends on the past and the present. The "akoko" tree at the arena of the Malokun shrine is given ritual greetings thrice as the carrier, overwhelmed by the ecstasy of the spirit-induced possession, hits the tree with his load three times and each time receding backward. These movements are analogic as they depict the direction of the ritual to the monarchy. The tree and the scapegoat fulfil "a high degree of intra-group reciprocation of movement" (Schechner 107). The carrier's attraction to the tree symbolises communication with the ancestral spirits whose creative energies associate "akoko" tree with royalty. The homage to the immanence of "akoko" tree as a symbol of authority, power and cosmic sanction is accompanied with songs.

The procession is a potent membership of the performance and typifies mass reverence for the aggrieved spirits of the ancestors and entertainment is achieved through copious songs, dancing and drumming to the delight of both human and metaphysical audience. The mass involvement of participating audience is a reflection of the cultural identity among indigenous people. As the performance is the collective desire of the people to uphold their

culture, the large crowd witnessing Odun Oba and Olofungbogho is symbolic of collective sanction because mass participation is a cultural responsibility that does not exclude adherents of western religions. Though members of the Christian and Muslim communities may not be physically present at the arena, their membership of the milieu compels psychological approval especially as they recognize ritual taboos and struggle not to negate them.

Within the processions are members of the chorus and they display an uncanny knowledge of history, myths and indigenous values. The songs dwell on major landmarks, many of which allude to mythical developments such as the female negation of ritual sanctity that threatened to scuttle the fabrics of the society and disrupts primordial practices. The performance of the dominion festival is devoid of any narrative. It relies on the rendition of two hundred and one songs, accompanied by dance-steps, movements, gestures and surrogate communications through the deployment of drums. Major socio-political developments affecting the town are revealed. Smith (1975) identifies festival behaviour as constituting cognitive messages pointing towards indigenously relevant information (Smith, 70). The songs appeal to both sensuous and psychological sophistications of the audience to which cultural and linguistic competence are tied. The songs become miniaturized sensibilities of the people and basic "underlying assumptions" inform the contents and equally facilitate their decoding (Dundes, 96; Ibitokun, 7, 70).

Dickie (1974) locates minimal value or worthiness with art (43). In this direction, festivals harbour salient aesthetic values and the deeper layers fulfil sociological necessities within which the limitations, challenges and breakthrough during confrontations with environmental, human and metaphysical factors are accommodated. The musical performance rests on the exploration of indelible mythological conflicts in order to establish moral lessons where the past is a basic evaluating yardstick. What takes place in the arena may be understood by the audience depending on individual's degree of linguistic

and mythological understanding. Olofungbogho relies strongly on the indispensability of drumming, singing, dancing, feasting and sacrifice, and these are veritable components of Yoruba indigenous performances. In this regard, all oral genres exhibit this performative employment of dance and sacrifice.

5. Beyond Aesthetics in Festivals:

Ovia Osese is a maiden dance in Ogori Magongo in Ogori Magongo Local Government area of Kogi State, Nigeria. It celebrates female's chastity. It amplifies the strength in purity in maidens in an era when sexual perversion is rife among underage female members of the society and the consequent sexually transmitted diseases that threaten the continued existence of humanity. Young girls who could maintain their virtue and uphold their virginity in the face of pressure from peer groups are celebrated and rewarded. The celebration becomes an avenue for bachelors to choose their life partners. The importance of a maiden dance to the world full of promiscuities may better be imagined. The presence of such a celebration online where many viewers may come into contact may be what one or two female folks need to have a rethink and safeguard their chastity where virginity is almost becoming anachronistic. Similar festivals of transition, such as Ero male dance at Ipele-Owo, Obitun dance at Ondo and others may be found in the cultural environment.

Festivals are a confluence of diverse oral genres that it becomes difficult to categorise them into a water tight compartment that will be unique from the performances of oral poetry, legends and folktales especially in the exploitation of artistic ingredients. Within the performances of "Eje" where the sea-nymphs entertain and the dramatic execution of the purification bid of "Oluwen" during "Olofungbogho" are intermittent references to the heroic exploits of the principal performers. Women constitute the chorus and their recitation becomes synonymous with songs as it may be difficult to distinguish the praise songs from actual musical performance. The heroic renditions fulfil diverse functions and captivate the audience

amid intermittent references to the mythical parallels of the performers. Muller (1999) identifies the interplay of different genres even in theatre such as the undercurrent of costumes, masks, drums and other mythical anecdotes: "In the same way as music, circulation of mask and costumes are essential aspects forging the unity of the performing arts field beyond genre's distinction" (Muller, 18).

6. Conclusion

The extent to which festivals may be considered localized in the age of Information and Communication Technology may be subject of controversy. This has belied the age-long debate about the possibility of festivals being described as drama in view of the minimal dialogues, conflicts and denouement latent in them. Festivals must be understood as having a unique form which may not adhere strictly with the forms associated with western drama. The difficulty at distinguishing performers from the audience explains the uniqueness of indigenous performances. Consequently, the communal efforts at orchestrating the people's artistic and cultural sensibilities within a performance involving all members may have conditioned festivals. This present study sums up the people's concept of morality, religion and art as significant to such celebrations. The creative ability of indigenous artists is identifiable in the sociological aura of the era and the spectacle is characterised by unpremeditated ordering, drifting and withdrawal as the psychological reactions of individual performer might dictate. The group-clusters attendant on performances even when unconsciously determined, project indigenous art as more than parochial celebrations. Festivals are equally synonymous with indigenous artistry subsisting in the memories but expressed in the annual rendition. However, the intentions are sociological projections within the umbrella of art, entertainment as a vehicle necessitating convergence and conscious attempt at sensitising the audience towards achieving continuity of ideologies in the climes.

The advancement in technology has a wide

range of influence on all human endeavours that one may erroneously conclude that some clime-restricted performances may be heading towards an eventual eclipse. This is far from the truth as the age of the Internet has further the interest of the teeming populace of the world whose desire is entertainment towards the uncanny artistic peculiarities that may be found in the remote parts of the world. It is not surprising, therefore, when field researchers thronged the arenas during the performances of Boabo festival at Igbobini, Iweh at Ugbotu and the Umale masquerades at Ode Irele in 2018. The researchers were, no doubt, in search of performative scripts no matter how minute to further their nest in the search for the mine of social, material and artistic capitals that such indigenous festivals might provide in the entertainment of their followers.

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