

Igue Ceremony as a Theatrical Performance: An Appraisal

Osakue Stevenson Omoera

*Department of Theatre and Media Arts, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Edo State, Nigeria
Mobile: 234 803 571 4679, E-mail: omoera@yahoo.com*

KEYWORDS Igue Performance. Oba Chiefs. Theatre. Benin

ABSTRACT The paper examines *Igue* ceremony, which is an annual religious and cultural event celebrated by the *Benin* speaking people of Edo State, Nigeria. As a communal and spiritual activity, the *Benins* mark *Igue* with pomp. Within this context, the paper adopts the historical and descriptive approaches as its method of contending that some events during *Igue* are colourful theatrical performances. It concludes that the artistic performances present as well as represent in many ways than one, the common goals, the common aspirations and the common ancestry of the *Benin* tribe.

INTRODUCTION

“Theatre is the place of intersection of all the arts: music, movement, voices, scenery, lighting etc” (E. T. Kirby 1969).

The above quote affirms that theatre is a synthesis of several creative arts. In other words, a true theatrical performance must integrate the arts of music, dance, mime, drama, scenery, language, among others; in order to effectively communicate certain messages to an audience. With regard to the foregoing, this paper explores some events that take place during the *Igue* ceremony, which is celebrated by the *Benins* in Edo State, Nigeria. It argues that some events during the socio-religious observance are colourful theatrical performances. It further argues that the artistic performances present as well as represent certain aspects of the humanistic worldview of the *Benin* people.

Benin history and civilization is replete with ceremonies and festivals that continue to excite scholastic attention in contemporary times. According to Izevbigie (2007): The *Benins* have very many festivals celebrated in different parts of the *Benin* kingdom. They include: *Amaza* festival, *Eho* festival, *Ekaba* festival, *Ikpoleki* festival, *Ekpo* masquerade festival, *Ihiekhue* festival, *Isiokuo* festival, *Ovia* masquerade festival, *Igue* and *Ague* festival which was being celebrated when the Phillip Party came in violation of the kingdom in January 1897. There are many more festivals and ceremonies celebrated by the *Benins* but there is none that is as important and widely celebrated as *Igue*. This is perhaps so because of its popularity. In this regard, Izevbigie (2007) again notes that *Igue* has taken not only the central stage but it has erroneously been

subsumed to be the umbrella of the annual *Benin* palace festivals. Another reason why *Igue* ceremony has assumed such prominence is that it is the only traditional festival that is celebrated throughout the *Benin* speaking parts of Edo state with pomp and ceremony. Ogbonmwan (2007) corroborates the above when he posits that *Igue* ceremony is an annual and national festival of thanksgiving of the entire *Benin* people. It is the most universal amongst the festivals in the kingdom and no doubt forms the heart and soul of Edo nationalism. The festival is deeply rooted in their culture. Aimiuwu (2007) asserts that culture is the permanent bridge in life's time continuum. It links the past with the present, and illuminates the future. Aimiuwu (2007) further posits that:

Culture defines a people's mileposts in the journey to the Promised Land. It is both the mark and marker of civilization. It expresses the collective persona of a people, defines their values, the highs and the lows, lubricates their habits and attitudes, demonstrates their collective will, structures their enforcement processes, and their systems of reward and sanction.

With the present day geopolitical arrangement, the *Benin* speaking people are predominantly found in the southern part (Edo south) whilst the *Esan* and the *Etsako* are in the majority in the central and northern parts respectively. Edo south comprises of seven local government areas. These include: *Oredo*, *Egor*, *Ikpoba-Okha*, *Orhionmwon*, *Urhunmwonde*, *Ovia South-West*, and *Ovia North-East*. All the dukedoms, major towns and villages in these seven local government areas partake in the *Igue* ceremony annually.

Every community the world over has its own sense of appreciating its art – performance. Central to this is that what is considered artistic per-

formance emerges in a variety of situations within each community. Schechner (1977) captures this essence when he defines performance as:

The whole constellation of events that takes place in both performers and audience from the time the first spectator enters the field of performance where the theatre takes place to the time the last spectator leaves.

The Donysian festival of the Greeks; the gladiator competitions of the Romans; the liturgical worship of the Medievalists; the Chinese Noh theatre and *Buranku* puppet performance; The Japanese Kabuki theatre; the various historical and mythical re-enactments in Black Africa, aside modern theatrical shows are performances in their own right. As “events”, they are purposive. They bring about communal assemblages, create avenues for letting our steam and anxiety, reminding the people of their civic responsibilities and serve as a means to propitiate the gods and expect good fortunes. Exploring drama, a major rib of a theatrical performance, Aristotle viewed performance as a “mimetic process”, that is, an imitation of an action. Extending this Rotimi (1981) posits that: The standard acceptance of the term drama within a cultural setting, at any rate, implies “an action... or of a person or persons in action”, the ultimate object of which is to edify or to entertain.

“Action” here could also be seen as an organized presentation – revue, festival, ritual display, to mention but a few, which is significant to a people. In other words, activities that reveal in their style of presentation, in their purpose, and value, evidence of imitation, enlightenment and/or entertainment, could be said to be artistic performances. This is perhaps the point Goffman (1976) made when he conceptualized performance as: ...all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers.

Performance as noted in the foregoing has some basic elements. In this regard, Brockett (2000) says: ... the performance including all the processes involved in the creation and presentation of a production and audience (perceivers). Each is essential and each affects conception of the whole.

The point being canvassed is that performance may have varied hues and shades but in all, the performer, the place of performance, the

audience and certain elements of production are crucial. For instance, a performer creates an idea, rehearses and decides to put it up as an art. This art must necessarily take place in a space – a village square, a theatre building or even an open field and to complete the circle there must be an audience. The performer though in varying degrees, also explores elements such as costume and make up, dance, music, poetry, recital, scenery, to mention but a few, in packaging his art to effectively communicate with the audience.

Functionally speaking, performances are geared towards entertainment. They also serve as culture “transmitters” and religion “preservers”, means of teaching morals, means of enlightenment and socialization. A performance may highlight the common official values of the society in which it occurs. Perhaps this is why Goffman (1976) sees performance as a ceremony, which is “An expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community”. Black Africa’s perception of performance chimes in with the foregoing view. Bakary Troare (1972) posits that performance or theatre in West Africa is a presentational as well as a representational art. As a presentational art, African theatre, especially West Africa theatre is endowed with great and elaborate spectacles such as dance, music, songs, recitals, masquerades, all happening in one ceremony with a high degree of balance, unity and rhythm. As a representational art, it tends to re-enact past religious, political and social events, which often glorify or commemorate the great feats of the peoples’ ancestry. Troare’s position dovetails with Nwoko’s observation as regards performance in traditional African society. Nwoko (1981) asserts that: ...theatre is first and foremost a visual expression using music, sound (sung or spoken), movement (walked or danced), design, colour, two-or-three dimensional shapes... to build up an association with the world of nature.

IGUEASA THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE

Igue is an annual socio-religious observance that rallies briefly the many incredible proportions of ceremonies, which used to be performed by the *Oba* and his subjects in *Benin* Kingdom. As a religious and cultural ceremony, it is celebrated with pomp and ceremony. It marks the end of the *Benin* year and ushers in a new one with renewed hope for peace and prosperity. The

various artistic performances during the ceremony show that the *Benins* have relatively kept their past. Much of the performances are of group nature.

Essentially, *Igue* is a combination of nine major ceremonies, viz: “*Otue-Ugierhoba*, *Ugie-Erhoba*, *Iron*, *Otue-Iguoba*, *Igue-Inene*, *Emobo*, *Iguivioba*, *Igue-Edohia* and *Ugieewere*” (Festivals of Bendel State, Nigeria 1975: 39). These ceremonies carry on their trail performances that are both presentational and representational. *Igue* is endowed with elaborate spectacles ranging from dance, music, songs, incantations, magic, recitals, chants, and other artistic renderings that commemorate historical feats of the ancestors and events which remind the people of their civic responsibilities. *Igue* lasts for about 11 days. Each day’s activities are heralded by the acts of the royal jester, *Akharowan* who is clad in white cap, with a handbag.

The “*Otue-Ugierhoba*” is the first in a series of ceremonies. The chiefs accompanied by their individual dance groups dance to the palace to pay homage to the “*Umogun*” (the *Oba*, who is dressed in his full traditional regalia of beads) and pray for his longevity on the throne. This event is usually a spectacle to behold as chiefs in their complete ceremonial robes (clad in white robes from the waist down and leaving the chest bare, with beads around the neck and the hands), according to the hierarchy in the palace display their artistic prowess to the admiration of all.

The next is “*Ugie-Erhoba*”. This is an occasion for the incumbent *Oba* to pay homage to his ancestor at the shrine of past *Obas*. During this ceremony too, the chiefs reaffirm their loyalty to the *Oba* and seek favour. This culminates in the giving of chieftaincy titles to loyal and deserving citizens and hereditary titles given to their heir-apparent. Here again, the chiefs individually perform a regal dance called “*Asaigbaide*” with the royal sword, “*Eben*”. This elegant display by the chiefs is usually welcomed with “*Eyare, eyare...*” songs by the people as the “*Eben*” creates contours in the air.

Another spectacular dance-drama during *Ugie-Erhoba* is that of the “*Uzama Nihiron*” (King makers) and *Eghavbonore*. This is actually a re-enactment of an incident in the past. It involves many verbal, non-verbal or paralinguistic actions. Each of the chiefs questioningly gestures with his left hand at the *Oba* who sits on the “*Agba*” (the royal stool) and the *Oba* similar-

ly replies him with the right hand. This symbolic exchange re-enacts an event that led to the death of *Iyase Emuze* during the 14th Century at the time of *Oba Ohen*.

The “*Iron*” is the next. This ceremony involves a mock battle called “*Igue-Iron*”. It re-enacts the rebelliousness of *Ogiamien* during the restoration of *Obaship* in the person of Prince *Oranmiyan* from *Ile-Ife*. The rebellious group with cudgels and clubs led by the *Oliha* and *Evien* attack the *Oba*’s forces and in the process, they are defeated as the *Oba* becomes victorious. This mock battle is between the *Oba* and the elders representing the kingmakers (*Uzama Nihiron*). Though this ceremony is not presented before the public, it however represents a landmark, which is significant to the *Benins*.

The “*Otue-Igueoba*”, “*Igue-Inene*”, “*Emobo*”, “*Iguivbioba*”, “*Igue-Edohia* and “*Ugie-Ewere*” are subsequent ceremonies which vibrate and re-vibrate with theatrical energies. They are ritualistic (religious) ceremonies, which are tied to historical incidents in *Benin* history, providing avenues for the people to make supplications to “*Osanobua*” (Supreme God) for preserving the *Oba*’s life, their lives and granting peace and prosperity in the land.

The “*Ugie-Ewere*” for instance is performed by the youths. The ceremony is traceable to *Oba Ewuare* the Great who during his trying days as a prince was protected by *ewere* leaves from being killed by his enemies. He had been warned of the presence of his pursuers on his way to a bush land, *Igogogin*. After ascending the throne, he named the leaf “*Ebe-Ewere*” (the leave of good fortune) and requested of *Ogieka*, a chief who resides in *Benin – Ughoton* road to marry the eldest of his beautiful daughters, *Ubi*. However, as fate would have it, she proved stubborn and difficult to handle and eventually was driven out by the *Oba*’s maids who struck her with burning firebrands while chanting “*Ubirie*” (*Ubi go*).

Benin history has it too that, the *Oba* later requested Chief *Ogieka* to send his second daughter, *Ewere* in place of *Ubi*. *Ewere* was welcomed with great happiness and her arrival brought immense loyalty and allegiance to the *Oba* in cash, words, and deeds by the people. With the advent of time, *Ubi* became synonymous with evil spirit and sundry bad things while *Ewere* personified good fortune and divine favour. During the *Ugie-Ewere*, these landmarks are re-enacted in a colourful display by the *Be-*

nins to rejuvenate and reaffirm their common values. As early as four or five am on the *Ugie-Ewere* day, the youths; young men and women move in groups to re-enact the warding-off parade of the evil spirit (*Ubi*). They carry firebrands during this cleansing ritual to rid the land of any evil and on their way back from the outskirts of Benin, around six or seven am, they engage themselves in a boisterous dance to pluck the “*Ebe-Ewere*” (leaf of good fortune) – a symbol of hope, prosperity and peace (Isekure 2007). They dance and sing the “*Ebe-Ewere*” song to various households, blessing the people with the “*Ewere* leaf”. In response, the citizens give the youth groups some money as a token of appreciation. Omoruyi (1981: 12-13) captures the festive scenario of *Ugie-Ewere* thus:

Every season of the year has its special ceremony, even the end of the year is rounded with Igue festival in which the Oba is the chief celebrant, culminating in the general merriment of all citizens and ending with the early morning dance of Ebe ewere-ewere ceremony.

From the foregoing, the theatrical effervescence of *Igue* ceremony cannot be doubted. This theatrical nature stems from the fact the *Igue* integrates all the trappings of what may be considered as Africa theatre. In this regard, Banham (1976) notes that:

The most important point to make is that African theatre has developed without major restrictions placed upon it by physical limitations, or time barriers, such as traditionally proscribe the form and length of much European and American theatre. There is no reason at all why an African play should consider itself as something that has to be contained within two or three hours. It need not necessarily have an Aristotelian shape to provide beginning, middle and end, for it may be part of a continuous festival or otherwise relate to a time scale of far greater magnitude.

In other words, African theatre is likely to contain and bring together diverse elements of entertainment and communication, including dance, music, mime, masquerade, song, among others, Its language can be verbal, musical or physical, and all at the same time (Banham 1976). Therefore, the boundlessness of *Igue* makes it to eminently qualify as a theatre which is not restricted by the preconceptions and preconditions that have done so much to limit contemporary European and American theatre. Indeed, *Igue*

presents a series of events that reinforce common values, shared bonds and common taboos amongst the *Benins*. It re-establishes what Enekwe (1981) calls: “Links with the past and compels the living to participate in hilarity and comradeship of a communal happening”.

CONCLUSION

All festivals and ceremonies anywhere in the world represent the experiences of human beings. They are either the experiences of a person, a group of people or a nation. In this regard, the series of events during *Igue* ceremony of the *Benins* as discussed in this paper are laced with spectacles such as dance, music, recital, incantation, drama, chants, to mention but a few. The events also represent important landmarks in the lives of the *Benin* people. It is therefore logical to conclude that *Igue* as a socio-religious ceremony contains plausible theatrical performances. Moreover, these performances present as well as represent, in many ways than one, the common goals, the common aspirations and the common ancestry of the *Benin* race. As Clark (1981) aptly observes: If theatre refers to an elegant imitation of action that is symbolic and significant to a people, then, there is plenty of it in Nigeria and Africa is most authentic.

REFERENCES

- Aimiuwu LE 2007. Benin Culture: Towards the Next Level. Paper presented in the Symposium on *Igue Festival: The Religious and Socio-Cultural Relevance in Modern Society* at Oba Akenzua Cultural Centre, Benin City, August 31, 2007.
- Aristotle 335 B. C. The Poetics. In: BF Dukore (Ed) 1974. *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc.
- Banham M 1976. *African Theatre Today*, London: Pitman Publishing Ltd.
- Brockett OG 2000. *The Essential Theatre*. 7th Ed., Orlando: Harcourt Brace Company.
- Clark JP 1981. Aspects of Nigerian Drama. In: Ogunbiyi Yemi (Ed.): *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*. Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, pp.57-64.
- Egharevba JU 1968. *A Short History of Benin*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Enekwe O 1981. Myth, Ritual and Drama in Igboland. In: Ogunbiyi Yemi (Ed.): *Drama and Theatre in Nigerian: A Critical Source Book*. Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, pp.138-143.
- Eweka EB 1992. *Evolution of Benin Chieftaincy Titles*. Benin City: Uniben Press.

- Federal Ministry of Information. 1991. *Culture and its Manifestations: Know Nigeria Series 3*. Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information.
- Goffman E 1976. Performances. In: Richard Schechner, Mady Schuman (Eds.): *Ritual, Play and Performance*. New York: The Seabury Press, pp.91-97
- Isekhure N Cultural Implication of Igue Festival: A Brief Focus on its Origin and Cultural and Spiritual Significance. *Paper presented in the Symposium on Igue Festival: The Religious and Socio-Cultural Relevance in Modern Society* at Oba Akenzua Cultural Centre, Benin City, August 31, 2007.
- Izevbigie O 2007. The Social Relevance of Igue Festival in Modern Society. *Paper presented in the Symposium on Igue Festival: The Religious and Socio-Cultural Relevance in Modern Society* at Oba Akenzua Cultural Centre, Benin City, August 31, 2007.
- Ministry of Home Affairs and Information. 1975. *Festival of Bendel State Nigeria*. Lagos: Ministry of Home Affairs and Information.
- Ogbonmwan F 2007. The Religious Implications of Igue Festival. *Paper presented in the Symposium on Igue Festival: The Religious and Socio-Cultural Relevance in Modern Society* at Oba Akenzua Cultural Centre, Benin City, August 31, 2007.
- Omoruyi A 1981. *Benin Anthology*. Benin: Cultural Publications.
- Schechner R 1977. *Essays on Performance Theory*. New York: Drama Books Specialists.
- Troare B1972. *West African Theatre and its Social Functions*. Ibadan: University Press.