

An Analysis of Jigbe as a Traditional Dramatic Performance

A.D. Menegbe

Department of Theatre Arts, Kogi State University, Anyigba, Nigeria

Abstract: Discussions have been on for along time over the issue of the existence of drama in traditional African society. Two schools of thought have crystallized. The evolutionist school maintains that there is nothing in traditional African society to be classified as drama. The relativist school postulates that drama strives abundantly in traditional African society. This study attempts an analysis of jigbe traditional drama as one of the many traditional dramatic performance in African it is observed that it could serve as one of the various source materials for modern African drama we recommend that it should be documented for the purpose of preserving it present form. We further suggest the performance be patronized for its survival.

Key words: Drama, traditional, jigbe, materials, patronized, performance

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary theatre artists have articulated their views on the subject of traditional drama in African. According to Ogunbiyi (1981), two schools of thoughts are clearly emerged. The first school of thought, the evolutionist school, holds that drama does not exist yet in African. What we call African traditional performance does not qualify to be classified as drama. Uka as quoted by Nzewi (1979) maintained:

What is usually called traditional drama ... is not yet drama. It is the huge legacy which may draw with ever increasing returns...what some usually and glibly call traditional drama is properly and essentially elements of drama

This adopts western definition of drama wholly and any performance which does not agree dogmatically with that definition is not perceived as drama. Ruth Finnegan, Kalu uka, M.J.C. Echeruo, Emmanuel Obiechina and their contemporaries belong to the evolutionist school. According to them, drama evolves from ritual: traditional performance should therefore, advance from it ritualistic position to a dramatic form. Echeruo (1971) asserts that the emergence of igbo drama based on the indigenous traditions will depend on how effectively it can be moved beyond the rich ritual character on the festival themselves.

The evolutionist school of thought is greatly influenced by Finnegan (1970). Who states: drama in African is not yet typical a wide spread or a developed form and that what Africans have are certain dramatic and quasi-dramatic phenomena. The second school of thought, the relativistic school. Flatly contradicts the

evolutionistic one and postulates that there is drama in Africa. One should appreciate such. To this group belongs Oso Eneke. Ola Rotimi and others. Succinctly, Clark (1981) sums up the view of this school. If drama means the elegant imitation of some action significant to a people, if this means the physical representation of the evocation of one poetic image or a complex of such images, if the vital element in such representation or evocation are speech, music, ritual, song as well as dance and mime. And if as the Japanese say of their Noh theatre, the aim is to open the ear of the mind of a spectator in a corporate audience and open his eyes to the beauty of form. Then there is drama in plenty in Nigeria.

Eneke (1981)'s argument forms the theoretical framework for this study. He opines that theatre is an experience and that what is termed ritual, drama or ordinary entertainment varies from a given context to another from one time to another and from a given place to another. He argues that ritual and theatre similar structurally and relate reciprocally rather than antipodally. The function theatre serves in a given culture determines the structures drama assumes. Drama is the representation of an action. It involves impersonation and the presence of a conscious audience.

JIGBE PERFORMANCE

Bassa-Nge is a tribe in Bassa local government area of Kogi state. Jigbe is a Bassa-Nge indigenous dramatic performance of chant, mime, pantomime, music, song and dance. Jigbe chant is narrative. It narrates the exploits of brave warriors. Jigbe chant contains praises of God Almighty, brave men, gods, medicine men, arrow poison manufacturers, arrow poisons fortune tellers, blacksmiths, farmers, hunting dogs, games, guns, bows and arrows and

the wildernesses. It also contains words of wisdom, proverbs and philosophies of life. Mime in the performance is known as emri, Emri is the dramatization of the martial art of warfare and hunting through action without the use of words. Music forms an integral part of the performance. The musical instruments used are: Atu, Agbele and Inyaduku, sometimes only Atu is used at other times the three musical instruments are used en-semble depending on the context of its performance. Atu is a special brand of traditional flute which has a perpendicular hole running through it from end to end. It has three holes bored at its side. Agbele is a small drum made of carved wood and monkey skin. It is played with two straight drumming sticks. Inyaduku is the biggest of the three musical instruments. It is a drum made of antelope's skin and clay pot. It is played with the two bare hands.

Jigbe is performed by hunters clad in hunting attire made out of traditional thick hand-wood cloth. The lead performed chants for about 2-3 min ending in a song. The lead singer calls while the chorus answers. At this stage, drumming, singing and dancing gets freezing. It is brought to a climax. The song, dance and drumming is brought to a stop with fresh chant. He continues with the chant till he starts singing on and on it goes non-stop. Both men and women dance to Jigbe music.

ORIGIN

The origin of Jigbe dramatic performance is shrouded in controversy. A school of thought speculates that the Bassa-Nges borrowed Jigbe from the Bunus among whom they sojourned en-route to their present settlement. Another school of thought believes strongly that jigbe has been an integral part of Bassa-Nge cultural heritage since the beginning of time. From the research finding Menegbe (1984). The argument of the latter school of thought appears to be more authentic. The roots of Jigbe dramatic performance, most likely lies deep in the traditional religion of the Bassa-Nge people. The influence of Bunu culture evident in Jigbe is probably due to the interaction between the Bassa-Nges and the Bunus when the Bassa-Nges settled briefly in Bunu land.

THE EVOLUTION OF JIGBE PERFORMANCE

The intrusion of Christian and Islamic religions into Bassa-Nge land about 1880 and 1850 AD, respectively shook the very foundation of Bassa-Nge traditional religion which is the bedrock of Jigbe performance. These foreign religions considered traditional forms of entertainment ritualistic. In churches and mosques people

were tutored to abstain from traditional practices including Jigbe performance and to scorn those who promoted such macabres. Thus, the prime religion-socio-cultural and artistic forum which accommodated and nurtured Jigbe performance was stifled.

With the passage of time, the numbers of those who followed the foreign religions with dogmatic pietism increased while those who adhered to traditional religion with dynamic dexterity decreased. This affected the popularity of Jigbe performance negatively.

According to Menegbe (1995), cultural re-awakening waxed strong around 1970 and Jigbe performances was one of the traditional forms of entertainment identified. Jigbe performing groups received moral and financial support from the elites. They were invited to grace occasions such as fund raising ceremonies, development union annual meetings, students association annual conventions and even Christian memorial services. They were also invited to towns and cities outside Bassa-Nge land where they entertained Bassa-Nge communities.

With the passages of time. The ritual of head falling which used to be important has become insignificant and increasingly irrelevant to Jigbe performance in celebration of big kills. Wild beasts are now fewer than before. Professional hunters are also reduced considerably. To hear that a wild beast has been shot these days is uncommon news. Even when such a feat happens. Jigbe is performed mostly as a secular dramatic exercise in jubilation without the ritual of head falling. This is because most people including the few existing hunters no longer practice the traditional religion. Even in a situation where the celebrant still believes in the traditional religion. He may perform the ritual much later in secret.

Equally, traditional funeral ceremony is gradually disappearing from the cultural (10) years only 3 full-fledged traditional funeral ceremonies have been recorded. Such ceremonies shall most likely get fewer in future. These two forums for the performance of Jigbe ritual drama is in its last vestige because the traditional religion which sustained the forum is crumbling those who still hold on to the belief are few and far apart most of them also prefer to operate under-ground. Jigbe ritual dramas have metamorphosed into secular drama because firstly, the beliefs which supported it are no longer potent. Secondly because the original context is almost completely phased out. Thirdly because the performance has been moved outside its original ritual context into new secular forums.

THE CONTEXT OF PERFORMANCE

Originally, jigbe was performed within two contexts. The first is the context of celebration and propitiation. When a wild beast is slain. The victorious hunter rejoices.

Jigbe is performed to celebrate the feat. During the performance, the Iti Pa (head falling) ritual is done. This is simply the offering of sacrifice to the spirit of the slaughtered game to avert the harm it may intend to do to the killer.

The second is the funeral ceremony context. During the celebration of the funeral of brave men, who must have distinguished themselves, jigbe is performed. During the performance, the erakwa Jigbe (jigbe he goat) sacrifice is offered to propitiate the spirit of the fallen hero. The people believe in the duality of nature. They believe that all things tangible or otherwise, animate or inanimate have matter and spirit at their base, the spirit being more important.

Analysis: This work attempts an analysis of jigbe dramatic performance under (9) sub-heading of Ritual, drama, chant, mime, music, song, dance, stage and audience.

Ritual: Drama and ritual are closely related man has an innate urge to influence nature to co-operate with him. This is the reason why he offers ritual sacrifices. He some times dance and imitates the movement of nature. For example, before the beginning of the planting season, man does the fertility dance so that he may have great harvest. To attain victory at battles. They engage in mock battles. And imitate the movement and pacing of games in preparation for a successful hunting expedition.

In Bassa-Nge traditional community the demarcation line between secular and religious affairs is fluid. In secular activities, dots of spiritualism are often embedded equally, religious phenomena have elements of secularism. In the same vein, though Jigbe is performed in celebration when a big and wild beast is slain, it has ritualistic undertones. Ritual in this sense is the translation of faith into external actions aimed at influencing the supernatural powers into action. Ritual is aimed at achieving magical effects. At this level, Jigbe could rightly be called ritual drama; the ritual existing alongside the drama.

Drama: Each community has a natural urge for dramatic entertainment. Every community attempts to satisfy this urge in her own peculiar way. The Bassa-Nges have developed Jigbe dramatic form to satisfy their own dramatic needs. They conceive drama as the re-enactment of life by an actor who imitates verbally and or mimetically human situation for the amusement, edification and entertainment of the audience. Jigbe performance is the representation of human experiences. In doing so, the artists draw from the common experience carefully studied

and transferred onto stage vividly through chant, mime, music, song and dance, Jigbe dramatic performance evokes mood, gives pleasure, edifies and entertains.

Chant: Jigbe chant is song delivered in half singing and half-talking tone. It is delivered in a fast wailing rhythmic pattern. The chant contains narrations of human experiences, praise of hunters. Warriors, gods, guns, bows and arrows, arrow poisons, arrow poison manufacturers, blacksmiths, medicine men, fortune tellers, farmers and beasts. It also includes proverbs, praise-names, history tradition, customs, laws and so on.

Mime: Emri is the mime in Jigbe performance. Emri is the dramatization of human experiences through non-verbal language using facial expressions, gestures, costumes and masks as the media of expression. Emri, the representation of the hunter's experiences is a conscious and systematic imitation of a hunter or hunters in action. Different aspects of the hunter's life are represented on the stage as he hunts games in the forest as he discharges his traditional duty of protecting domestic animals from wild beast and as he defends his community against external aggression and internal subversion in warfare. We shall discuss a few episodes to drive the point home.

An actor comes on stage. He carefully inspects his gun and satisfies himself that it is in a perfect working condition. He walks into an imaginary forest. At a point walking becomes impossible as a result of the thickness of the jungle. He therefore, walks on his knees and the palms of his hands. He discovers the trails of a game which he follows carefully. Along the track, he finds the droppings of the animal. He picks some up and observes them carefully. He finally drops them and tracks on. With his whip, he drives away imaginary flies crowding around his body especially his face, he finally sights the beast and stalks it with professional stealthiness. He takes a good aim at it, readjusts his position takes another aim and fires his gun. The game drops dead.

In another episode, he looks around himself carefully in search of a game. His attention is drawn to a game on a tree. He goes on his back and moves around on it, until he finds a convenient position from where he aims at the game and shoots.

In yet another episode, two actors take the stage, one acting as a wild beast which has come to attack a goat-ranch. The other acting as a hunter who is protecting the ranch from the attack of wild beasts. The actor playing the role of the beast crawls on his knees and palms toward the ranch while the hunter crawls on his belly towards the beast. The animal suddenly breaks into the ranch and attempts to run off with a goat but the hunter shoots it point-blank.

Music song and dance: Jigbe music, songs and dances are brisk and militant. The rhythm is fast and it evokes mood moving the depths of human pathos. Jigbe music and song have an awesome influence over emotions. Rapturing the body of the listeners in dance.

Jigbe once is energetic. One foot is placed in front of the other. The two feet, each stamping energetically on the ground one after the other in fast rhythmic movement. The woman dance with their hands slightly raised and stretched each to its side, swinging rhythmically in the air as the legs stamp. The men dance holding fly whips or bows and arrows pointing at imaginary animals as the legs stamp on the ground with agility. Jigbe dance does not limit itself to any particular part of the body rather, it employs even the most minute muscle. The dance grows faster and faster with the passage of each moment till it gets too fast for the eye to register all the movement. The participants and the audience get charged up emotionally as the chant, music and song gets more passionate bringing forth the memories of by-gone days., the author has seen elders shed tears as the exploits of their dead colleagues with whom they used to hunt were being recalled in chant. The mantle of old age was flung aside and old men took the floor, their faces lighting up with internal exhilaration as the ground vibrated under their feet. The music, songs and dances build up to a crescendo only to be stopped by a chant.

Stage: During the performance, at the venue of the occasion to which Jigbe performing troupe is invited, large circles; one circle enclosing the other are formed by the audience. The innermost circle encloses a clear arena. This arena is the stage on which Jigbe is performed. The stage is not a raised platform; rather. Both actors and audience remain on the same plain. Only a few members of the audience may be sitting down; majority of them remain in a standing position. The audience is not static as the members of the audience may take a walk around, move forward or backwards.

Audience: Jigbe audience is a participative one each member of the audience gives the actors imaginative collaboration for the complete actualization of the performance. Some active members of the audience may participate by joining in the choral song and dance when the performance moves them to that level. We have the passive audience members who stop only at the level of imaginative participation. There are the critical members of the audience who have watched several groups perform at various times. They compare and contrast the on-going performance with the past performances they have watched he may keep his judgment to himself or share it

with others. The critic may even move away from a performance he feels is not worthwhile, this class of people affect the standard of the performance as each Jigbe group attempts to out-do the other.

CONCLUSION

No community exists without one form of drama or the other. Jigbe is a form of traditional drama created by the Bassa-Nges to satisfy their natural urge for dramatic entertainment. Jigbe stated as a ritual drama. The beliefs which sustained the performance as ritual drama are fading out; the original contexts of its performance are consequently crumbling new contexts have emerged into which Jigbe has been transferred. Jigbe ritual drama has graduated into pure artistic aesthetic dramatic performance in its new forums of performance.

In conception, articulation and effect, Jigbe is similar yet distinct from dramatic traditions of other parts of the world in content form and the centrality of dialogue. The performance exists in its own world and it is drama in its own right. Because drama is more complex than what the western definition implies, it will be traditional performance is no drama simply because it is slightly distinct from the western concept of the written play.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Jigbe is a popular Bassa-Nge traditional dramatic performance which attracts large audience at every performance. Jigbe entertains, informs and educates. To derive these levels of satisfaction from the performance, one must possess a good understanding of Bassa-Nge language and its nuances.

The existence of Jigbe traditional dramatic phenomenon is dependent upon the encouragement and patronage it receives from its audiences. The continuous existence of Jigbe in future depends largely on the patronage and promotion it is able to receive. It is the recommendation that Jigbe should be patronized and promoted not only by the Bassa-Nges but by all traditional drama lovers; this shall ensure the survival of the phenomenon. Moreover, it shall influence the direction of the modern Nigeria drama and theatre by way of serving as resource material both in content and form. To preserve the present form of the performance, we recommend that a documentary film of Jigbe traditional drama be done by the Kogi state council for Arts and Culture.

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