

The Organisation of Igbo Traditional Performing Arts and Sustenance

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Abstract

This paper examines the Igbo performing arts in relation to organization and the factors which sustain their existence despite the changing trends the popular arts are undergoing in Nigeria. It is observed that Igbo traditional performing arts such as music, dance, songs and poetic chants originate from their culture which is handed over from one generation to another. It is also noted that the performances are expressions of their collective spirit espoused in the basic Igbo philosophy which guides the society. The performances are organized in various communities for entertainment to maintain the link with the gods, deities and the ancestral spirits as well as other supernatural forces they depend on for survival. So, the artist ensures the sustenance of his art by creating in relation to the existing traditional materials found in myth, ritual, history, and communal experiences. The performances are usually undertaken by some troupes including Egedege, Mkpokiti, Igbo Cultural War Dance, Nkwaumuagbogho, Adaeze and Igba Akwu Nche Enyi. It is also revealed that family and kinship affinities form the basis of operation for the performing arts and the troupes. Occasions which provide opportunities for the performances include the New Yam Festival, marriage, initiation and chieftaincy installation ceremonies, launching, birthdays and funeral. There seems to be hope for the future survival of the performing arts since they are still needed and cherished by the society. Therefore, it is recommended that governments, organizations and individuals should support the efforts aimed at sustaining the performing arts through the empowerment of the artists by making fund, facilities and training programmes available to them.

1. Introduction

The need to highlight the functions and factors which sustain Igbo traditional performing arts has necessitated this writing. This is due to the fact that many find it difficult to appreciate the existence of these arts in our communities and the need to sustain their continuance. It is against this background that this presentation is initiated. The paper will draw references from five Igbo troupes namely: Egedege Dance Troupe, Unubi, Mkpokiti Dance, Umunze, Adaeze Dance Troupe, Ngwo, Igbo Cultural War Dance, Olokoru, Umuahia and Igba Akwu Nche Enyi of Umuadobihi- Eziani, Ihiala. The performances of these troupes will enhance our understanding of their factors of sustenance which have made it possible for them to survive.

It is important to begin by defining some of the key words such as sustenance as well as Igbo traditional performing arts which are fundamental to us. According to Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English, sustenance is "the ability to keep something a life or in existence." This implies that there are factors which make it possible for the existence of our performing arts such as music, dance, songs, poetic chants and masquerades. The events that sustain these arts are occasions which provide the opportunities for the performances.

On the other hand, Igbo traditional performing arts are the art performances which are handed over from one generation to another. These include indigenous art performances in dance, music, and drama as well as the masquerade which are performed by the troupes or age grades, (otu ogbo) or by some members of the village or town. As the members get older, new ones are invited to replace them through active participation in the performances which they will eventually inherit. It is noted that through the above hand over process that the performances are sustained and propagated.

2. Cultural Background

At this point of our discourse, it is necessary to examine briefly the cultural background of the Igbo. This is due to the fact that the understanding of their culture will enhance our appreciation of their arts performances. It will also enable us to understand the circumstances under which Igbo traditional performances take place because the artist is influenced by the culture and events of the period. This situation is usually determined by the cultural perception of the society under

which the artist lives and operates. It is important to note that the art of a given society emanates from their tradition and culture which are in constant evolution. It has been observed that the artist creates in relation to the existing traditional materials found in myth, folktales, rituals, history, and communal experiences to harmonize his art. This situation seems to have prompted Ngugi Wa Thiongo to assert that the artist responds with his total personality to a social environment, which changes all the time. Being a kind of a sensible needle, he records with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tension in his changing society (47). The above observation is supported by Nwala Uzodinma and gives validity to the fact that the traditional Performing arts of the Igbo evolve from their culture and communal experiences (219).

3. Diversity in Performance

The environmental surrounding under which the Igbo traditional artists live determines the type of music and dance that are performed. Our cultural experience has shown that topological features such as land, rivers, forest, animals influence their choice of performance. Those who live in the river banks along the Niger and Anambra rivers tend to employ soft tones and gentle steps in their music and dance. They are surrounded by water and therefore tend to be conscious and gentle in movement in reverence to the slippery soil. They are usually associated with fishing, boat paddling and farming along the coast. Their arts evolve round the river with issues involving fishermen, goddesses of the river (momiweta), the maidens and the gifts from the river, witches and wizards in various manifestations. Meanwhile, those living along the coast enjoy the soft Egwu Amala Dance (paddle dance) and occupational dance associated with farming and fishing.

On the other hand, it is observed that those who live on the dry land tend to enjoy the energetic dance style exemplified in the fast tempo dance steps of the troupes such as Mkpokiti, Atiliogwu, Egedege, Adaeze and Igbakwu. The dryness of the environment tends to affect their performance to be agile. Their dance and musical actions are usually on the fast tempo as one has to eat properly and be physically fit before being involved in the performance. It also comes on the backdrop of the cultural orientation where laziness is abhorred. It seems to be either you dance well by moving your body or you sit and clap for those who are able to dance well.

4. Factors of Sustenance

One of the salient factors that sustain the traditional performing arts is anchored on the family and kingship affinity as the basis of operation. The performers see their art as part of their cultural heritage that should be allowed to exist with them. A troupe that comes to mind is the Egedege Dance Troupe, Unubi, which has seven members from one family. For example, the lead singer, the flutist and the 'aro' player are of the same mother. The family is also known to have sustained this particular music and dance as their traditional heritage for long. It is the dedication of these artists to what they regard as family heritage that has been the spirit that sustains the troupe. They usually argue that since their parents took part in Egedege dance, they are taking part in it and their children are already taking over from them. So, they believe that Egedege tradition will continue to flourish as it is transmitted orally from generation to generation.

Moreover, it is observed that in an effort to relate with the environment and establish link with the supernatural as well as explain the mysteries of life that the traditional artist involves in the arts of carving, painting, weaving, dyeing, pottery, dance, music, masquerading and celebration of festivals. It has also been noted that funeral obsequies are organized in order to qualify the dead to join the ancestors and be at peace with them. In Igbo world view, the ancestors are revered and accorded recognition in the affairs of the living. In their relationship with the spirit world, the Igbo organize various performances such as music, poetic chants, dance and masquerades in welcoming the ancestral spirits to partake in the celebration as they bring blessings to the living. Therefore, various means are used to actualize the encounter with the ancestral spirits. In *Igbo Mask: the Oneness of Ritual and Theatre*, Ossie Enekwe shared the above view by postulating that:

In preparation for this contact, the traditional man organizes festivals during which there is a free mingling of human, gods, spirits and re-embodied spirits ancestors. ... By free association, through dances, musical performances, prayer with the person of gods and spirits of ancestors the society is rejuvenated. This promotes continuity (56).

It is indeed this cherished encounter with the supernatural beings from the other world that the Igbo espouse in their masquerade performances. This view has also been expressed by Chike Aniakor (1985:91), who emphasised that:

It is through masking that the society traces itself back to its origin and essence of things. The mask is an artistic

projection of a people's image of reality as perceived and conceived through masking performances and touches on importance aspects of their universe (91).

From this point, it could be understood why the Igbo still engage in some of their traditional performances if only to maintain the link with the supernatural. It should be emphasized that the sum total of Igbo custom and tradition is encoded in their "Omenala". This is what the Igbo attempts to preserve and retain wherever they live as it is their symbol of identity and brotherhood. In this regard, it should be noted that one important tradition observed throughout Igboland which is transmitted generationally is the New Yam Festival (Emume Iriji, Iwa Ji). This is celebrated in honour of the earth goddess (Ala) for provision of life and good harvest. The festival provides great opportunities for social interaction. It is celebrated in different parts of Igboland with many art performances especially dance, songs and musical performances. It is by providing the opportunity for the performances that the festival serves as means of sustaining the arts.

In addition, it is noted that the traditional performing arts are also sustained by the community through a "collective spirit" embodied in Igbo world view expressed in the following words "Umunabuike" or "Igwebuike" which promotes and encourages communal achievements and team spirit or ventures. The entire community expresses their experiences and aspirations through the performances. To bring to reality this binding philosophy, a given community for example, Eziani village in Ihiala may decide to have a music or dance troupe as a means of entertaining themselves during social gatherings. The troupe will be used in outings when they visit other villages or engage in competitions, funeral, marriage or outing ceremonies. The community takes responsibility of organizing and financing the troupe. They take the troupe as their property and invest in it to ensure that it brings honour and pride to them. A typical example of this type of troupe is Igba Akwu Neche Enyi which is owned by Umuadobihi, Eziani- Ihiala in Anambra State.

In some Igbo traditional ceremonies, music and dance are performed for specific reasons. For example, there are designated musical tones and dance steps performed during the initiation into Ozo society or the installation of a new king. Some special musical performances are held and the new king dances in line with his ancestors. The music and dance performances serve as link between the king, the people and the ancestors. The performance ushers in a new reign within the dynasty. Without the art performances, the installation is incomplete since it is traditionally the artist that begins the ceremony with praise chants, it is also expected that the artist should chant the king back into the royal court. Also during the outing ceremonies, individuals, groups and villages come with different art performances to pay homage to the new king, hence, the performing arts are sustained.

Additionally, it has been noted that some Igbo traditional performing arts are also sustained by the activities of some professional groups such as farmers, hunters, goldsmiths or carvers. Each group incorporates a particular dance or musical performance to enhance their job. For example, it is noted that some labourers sing while cutting grasses or carrying load. This in effect results in the continuation of the traditional performances. This means of sustenance has also been highlighted by the Anambra State Ministry of Information and Culture on Igbo traditional performances which states that:

In Igboland, most social events are celebrated with music. Events such as marriage, child-naming, burial, harvesting are often celebrated with music. Music is frequently employed in situation of manual labour..... Integration of music with social events could be regarded as one of the definitive characteristics of Igbo traditional culture (6).

It is also on record that celebration of victory or achievement by individuals and groups serve as enhancing avenues for the performing arts. For instance, the Igbo Cultural War Dance of Olokoru, Umuahia in Abia State celebrates the return of the victorious warriors from battle or great achievers with dance or musical performances. As long as these celebrative dances are organized in various parts of Igboland, the performances will continue to flourish and be sustained.

Experience has shown that some functions of the performing arts troupes have sustained the existence of the arts. They have acted as a binding force within the traditional Igbo communities. The troupes have through their various performances created opportunity for the people to exchange ideas. For example, the performances have also served as avenues for the youth intending to get married to meet. They also serve as a means through which the performers or the audiences who do not relate with each other because of quarrel or misunderstanding find it easier exchanging pleasantries due to the team spirit that goes with the performances. This makes it possible for the people to support the existence of the traditional performances in their various communities.

It is observed that through the dance drama such as "Egwu Amara or Egwu Ojerima" or during the moonlight storytelling that the people are entertained as well as taught the ethical and moral values cherished by the society. Through this process, the children are gradually brought up to respect the moral and cultural norms of their community.

As many of our traditional folktales are not documented in either audio or video recorders, it is through these performances that they are preserved for the coming generation. This implies that the traditional performing arts will continue to exist as agents of cultural propagation. Again, Meki Nzewi captures this vital role of the performing arts by observing that:

Through dance, instrumentation, mime, visual arts and music generally, theatre captures and codifies a community's impression of man and his universe. Igbo traditional theatre therefore constitutes a reliable vector of society's historical, social and anthropological data (104).

Even from our contemporary dispensation, the government both federal, state and local government as well as foreign agents are involved in cultural revival and promotion. The federal government through the states council for arts and culture organizes performances staged during festivals such as National Festival of Arts and Culture, Black African Heritage Festival, competitions, receptions and celebrations. Many of the performing arts troupes from different states have taken the opportunity offered by these events to showcase their cultural heritage. A case in point is the Mkpokiti Dance of Umunze which has won gold in traditional acrobatic dance. These revival strategies have contributed immensely in sustaining the troupes and positioning them for the future performances that will sustain their arts.

It has also been observed that there is increase of interest and curiosity among scholars and researchers on African culture especially the Igbo which boast the sustenance of the performing arts. The findings of these studies give impetus and validity to the traditional performances. These performances are gradually attracting national as well as international recognition. In this regard Mkpokiti Dance, Umunze and Egedege of Africa, Unubi that have traveled to different parts of the world come to mind. The findings and recommendations from these studies serve as source of inspiration and improvement to the arts. The researchers have helped in shedding light on African culture, which is necessary for the arts and their sustenance.

5. The Way Forward

Since the Igbo performing arts serve as the means through which our cultural heritage is preserved and disseminated, it follows that they are still relevant to the society. This also implies that their sustenance should be maintained to enable them continue to exist. It is to ensure the continued existence of the performing arts that the following recommendations are made.

It is important that every community in Igboland should endeavour to organize the performances regularly. This will make it possible for the people especially the youth to be familiar with the rudiments of the arts of the performances. A special arrangement should also be made to attract the audience who are not from the town or even tourists from abroad to attend. Performance calendar should be drawn to keep the public informed. This could serve as a tourist attraction that will yield income for the community and the country at large.

It is advocated that efforts should be made to ensure that regular performances are undertaken for continuity. For example, competitions with prizes to be won are to be organized by the art agents such as National Council for Arts and Culture as well as the Ministry of Culture and Tourism at the local, state and federal levels for the various troupes that participate in the performances to showcase their arts. The prizes should include monetary reward as well as other material gifts to encourage the artists to be committed to their art.

Moreover, arrangement should be made to facilitate the performances in other parts of the country and even abroad. This could also be done in form of cultural exchange programme with other countries. It will then serve as means of advancing our cultural relations and economic interest in different parts of the world which will ginger global peace as well as the realization of the millennium goal. Cultural exchange should be organized for the artists to enable them acquire experiences that will improve the arts. The government can through the cultural departments of our foreign missions organize performances for the troupes as a way of exposing them to acquire new skills that will impart positively on their performances and facilitate the showcasing of our cultural heritage to other peoples of the world. Again, performing artists from other countries can also be encouraged to visit Nigeria to showcase their culture through art performances and exhibition of their art facts. This forum can serve as an opportunity for our people to look at other cultures in order to exploit the benefits that are derivable from them.

Experience has shown that culture due to many developmental factors is not static as it could be blended with the positive aspects from other people's cultures. For example, Igbo performing artists can through inter cultural relations borrow the aspects of the Yoruba, Ijaw or even from the Brazilian, Asian or European art performances that could be blended with ours. It could still be performed in its original formation with the artists retaining all the dance steps or songs

with modest modification. This is capable of giving rise to a new art form that is a mixture of both cultures which will be unique.

Furthermore, the teaching of the performance skill should be undertaken at both the primary, secondary and tertiary institutions where theatre arts and other related courses are offered. This is to ensure that the youth are familiar with the rudiments. When the performance skill is acquired at a tender age, it will facilitate the continuity of the performances. Another means of ensuring the perpetuity of the performing arts is through documentation. There is need for media coverage of the performances in radio, television, magazines and newspapers. Audio and video cassettes are also to be produced. This will create awareness for the performances and attract more audience. It could also be used as means of attracting sponsors for the performances. The availability of sponsors will enhance the sustenance of the performances.

6. Conclusion

From the above, it could be seen that there is future for the performing arts in Igboland since their factors of sustenance are still available. This is due to the fact that the people are still willing to support them morally and financially. The performing troupes and their arts are still essential to the performances of some functions in the society. Since these arts of music, dance, poetic chants or masquerade are still needed, the society makes effort to sustain their existence through participation in communal events such as festivals, marriage and installation as well as funeral ceremonies. Again, it is observed that through the art performances, our cultural heritage is preserved and propagated, hence their continued sustenance. Since the troupes are invited to perform at public ceremonies, it follows that their performances and services are still needed and cherished by the society as the people provide fund and other resources for the arts which sustain their existence.

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