

LITERARY AND ARTISTIC DIMENSIONS OF THE UDU FEMALE CIRCUMCISION FESTIVAL

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Abstract

Female circumcision as a practice has generated heated debates throughout the world. It is often criticized and opposed by many who have tagged it barbaric and inhuman. There have been varying attempts to outlaw the practice in different parts of the world, regarding it as female genital mutilation. However, irrespective of the foregoing controversies generated by female circumcision, it is still a practice among the Udu speaking people of Urhobo in Delta State of Nigeria. This is owing to the acknowledgement of the religious and artistic significance embedded in the practice. Among the Udu people, the female circumcision rite is a veritable festival with a religious undertone and it is celebrated amid much funfare. This paper explores the female circumcision festival described as “Orę Emetę Yawon” as a dramatic art which provides avenue to showcase the rich religious, traditional and creative endowment of the Udu people. Dramatic elements such as costumes, props, make-up, dance, clapping of hands, singing, stamping of feet, characters, audience, stage or performance arena are resonant in the female circumcision festival of the Udu people. All these artistic elements enhance the realization of the theatrical and spectacular atmosphere of the performance. This paper reveals the artistic relevance of the Udu female circumcision festival and attempts a literary analysis of some songs rendered during the celebration. The literary and analytical methods are therefore adopted in this study.

Introduction

Ordinarily, the term festival often invokes the thought of celebration of a special event which brings people together at a particular period of the year. It could be for social or religious purpose. Festivals, nonetheless, play more significant roles among the people who observe it. It is on this note that Anigala (1991) describes festival as regular features in traditional African societies with cultural and religious practices and such

practices often galvanized into art forms. The point here is that festivals provide a means to express religious, social, cultural and artistic obligations or commitments of the people.

This view is in consonance with Ogunbiyi’s (1981) position that there is the existence of a robust theatrical tradition rooted in the numerous religious rituals and festivals in many Nigeria communities. The emphasis is on the spiritual aspirations of man which

stimulate the desire to communicate with the gods or the dead (ancestors) through sacrifices, and these results in festival celebrations or religious practices. These forces are represented by images or masks during the festival periods. From the foregoing, one perceives a strong connection between festivals and drama. No wonder Akporobaro (2012) asserts that any gathering, social, clan or religious has the ingredients and elements of theatre and drama in it. He adds that burial, or marriage ceremonies, initiations, installation of kings, or chiefs have the elements of drama in them as they entail performance. In the drumming, dancing, singing, drinking, costumes and masquerades, there are enactment, performance, performer and audience. He further identifies the performers' skills in dancing, chanting, costumes, clothes and others as artistic elements and theatrical possibilities which are the literary cum artistic dimensions of the events. A thorough evaluation of the Udu female circumcision festival, no doubt, reveals the potentials of a ritual with artistic elements as it entails all the aforementioned features.

The Udu People

The Udu people are found in the region between Okpare watercourse and the Warri River. Enerhen, which is part of Udu is situated outside Udu near the northern part of Uvwie and North Eastern part of Warri. It is made up of about 30 villages and towns. Orhuwhorun, Owrhode and Ovwian are some of the villages in Udu where the female circumcision festival is observed. The festival is a strong bond, uniting the whole people and they show a strong sense of devotion when observing it. All the villages

in Udu participate in this female circumcision festival except Orhuwhorun people whose female circumcision festival is held on a different period of the year.

The Female Circumcision Festival of the Udu People

The female circumcision festival is of particular interest in this work because it has generated controversies among scholars, especially women, who agitate for female liberation. It has also raised dust among human rights organizations and health officials. The reactions have been in different ways. Gender activists see it as an act that should be stopped at once while the traditionalists view it as a practice to be observed to maintain peace and protection in the society. But, why these mixed reactions?

First, female circumcision is seen as female genital mutilation (FGM) and a practice based on culture with ritual observances.

The book, *Human Rights: The Essential Reference* indicates that an estimated 130 million women have undergone female genital mutilation and usually under unhygienic condition using crude objects such as scissors, razor or even some sort of knives. The practice is viewed as a powerful marker of belonging and affirming a woman identity. Among the traditional people of Udu, to be circumcised is normal; it establishes the eligibility for marriage and initiates a girl into womanhood. The people also believe that the practice improves fertility and prevent infant mortality. However, many are not in support of the practice and are of the opinion that government should enact laws prohibiting and criminalizing female

circumcision. Female circumcision is practiced in many parts of Africa and it is often accompanied with ceremonies or ritual performances. The Udu female circumcision festival is not an exception. The performance aspect of the practice is the focus of this paper.

The Performance of Udu Female Circumcision Festival

The festival begins with intense preparations which include travelling home, painting and decoration of houses, clearing of streets and village squares, fetching firewood and many other things. Those concerned even make expensive traditional attires. 'Emeteyavwon', according to Bruce Onobrakpeya (1982), is the greatest honor done to a young woman by her parents or husband. It is usually, seriously contemplated and the people save money towards it. The preparation includes buying of food items and expensive ornaments (*Ivie*). It is a time to show off.

The initiate is a female described as '*Opha*' who is of varying age ranging from thirteen (13) to about thirty (30) and sometimes more. The circumcision rite of females in Udu is in two phases. The first is known as 'Eyavwodjaho' which is the actual cutting off of part of the most Sensitive female sexual organ, the clitoris. It is fittingly described as 'Eyavwodjaho' because this phase of the circumcision is done secretly and quietly well in advance of the actual ceremony to ensure proper healing of the injury. It is accompanied with unannounced rituals and sacrifices to forestall danger and prevent the enemies from taking advantage of the occasion.

The second phase is the ceremony which is an elaborate festival that comes up in stages and it is known as 'Eyavwophia'. The first stage is the opening ceremony. It is held at Otor-Udu the headquarters of all the Udu towns and villages. The chief priest, 'Odede' and other priests: Ade, Igbu and Igbebo' are usually present to make sacrifices and pour libations at the 'Ogwan Orere' (town hall where the shrine is). The 'Ade' performs all the rites of the circumcision toward a maiden (perhaps his daughter if he has one for that particular year, but if he has none another is chosen). So the ceremony commences with this particular 'Opha'. All the rites performed towards her are representative of what all other 'Epha' will experience. This part lasts for eight (8) days, (Udurhirin), after which delegates return home to their respective villages. Then the official proclamation or announcement known as 'Unueje' follows with a song titled 'Odje'. Various theatrical activities such as drumming, singing, dancing, skipping, jumping and more are observed. Men, women, young and old mix freely and engage in loose conduct of various kinds because there is no 'egha' (forbidden act) during this period. The 'Odje' is accompanied with morally debased songs. There are a lot of activities in the home of each 'opha' and even the entire community after the 'odje' has been brought. These include preparing a place for the 'opha' and her friends 'Ikopha', offering of sacrifices by the priest, cooking, eating, drinking and sending of food to friends and relations throughout the period of the festival.

The *Opha* is literarily crowned and beautifully constumed. Everything is done for her and she is entertained with different

activities. She also enjoys the freedom to go out either to the market or visits friends in the company of her 'Ikopha'. There is the final joint ceremony at Otor-Udu with many people in attendance this time around. The priests, 'epha', 'Ikopha', relations and spectators are all present after the Opha's outing ceremony, *Opharueki*, in her respective village. Prayers and libations are offered by the 'Odede' thanking the gods and ancestors and asking for blessing and guidance till the next festival season.

Dramatic Features of Oral Performance in Udu Female Circumcision

Performance: Nigel, Fabb (1997) describes performance as words said in particular ways and perhaps accompanied by gestures, in a particular place and time and performed to an audience in a cultural context. This view is corroborated by Akporobaro (2012). In considering the characteristics of oral literature, he sees performance as a basis of communication and that an oral literary expression exists as a performance, a speech act accentuated and rendered alive by various gestures, social conventions and unique occasion in which it is performed. Going by this explanation of performance, one will see that performance permeates every aspect of the Udu female circumcision festival.

The opening festival which is performed at Otor-Odu culminates in the proclamation by means of a song:

Odjghwoghwo e
Sounding 'ghwogho' (ideophonic)
Chorus: Nuneginēdore
Today is a festival day

This song, like every other song during the festival is greeted with actual performance in the form of dance. Different styles of dancing such as jumping, skipping, wriggling of waist and movement of the body in different directions are involved. These various forms of dancing either show flexibility such as in the case of women or strength as in the case of men. Performance also include drumming, clapping of hands, stamping of feet and other bodily displays. The performers along with the participating audience use their creative imagination and manipulate their bodies as artistic tools to create aesthetics and delight the spectators. Various dramatic activities are mostly carried out in the village square, streets or major roads running through the village, streamside and market area.

'Iphrięga' is another spectacular aspect of the performance. This is performed twice during the Udu female circumcision festival.

'Iphrięga' involves real action; able bodied young men are involved. Older persons, women and children observe from distance as they sing, dance and clap their hands. The young men perform different acrobatic displays and thrust out their machetes in a mock fight. They do this carefully not with the intention to inflict injury on the opponent but to show their skill and ability to defend themselves. They scarcely put on clothes so as to exhibit their conspicuous non-relaxed body muscles indicating strength.

Another interesting aspect of performance is seen in the stage of the Udu female circumcision rite described as 'Opha rueki'. It is an exciting scene of beauty, elegance and pageantry of royal occasion. The 'Opha',

that is the initiate, literally comes out in the company of her 'Ikɔpha' (bridal train), relatives, friends and other well wishers. The 'Opha' eye-catching costume, elegant body movement and the accompanied carnival arrest the audience's interest. It is a colourful procession which proceeds through the broad road to enthrall spectators. The various scenes (including the ones discussed above) no doubt offer captivating performance which shows that performance is undeniably a dominant feature of the Udu female circumcision rite. This makes the festival attain its most dramatic plane.

Costume, Make-Up and Props

In most African festivals, costume, make-up and props are essential elements and help to create theatrical effect. The 'Opha' has her special costume and make-up. The same applies to the 'Ikɔpha'. The 'Opha' has a colourful attire, fanciful beads worn on the neck, waist and wrist. She ties a beautiful and expensive piece of velvet ('Efenudu') round her waist and it does not go beyond the knee. She is practically dressed like a queen and she is adored. She regularly changes her clothing throughout the period of the festival. She is daily bathed by the ikɔpha' and the cam wood dye is rubbed on her palm, feet, neck and other parts of her body. She also rubs a generous amount of powder on her neck and face. The Opha's special hairdo is called 'Igurun'. It is a local weaving of the entire hair with a single horn-like finishing at the middle. She ties strings of beads on the hair and attaches a colourful feather. Other colourful and expensive pieces of cloth are neatly folded and tucked around her waist and she moves elegantly along the road.

This outfit identifies her as the 'Opha'. Others with special costume for the occasion are the chief priest and other priests who appear in white apparels. This suggests the priests' purity and moral standing that qualifies them for their role of priesthood. The priests also mark their bodies with what is called *orheri*, a native chalk. All are indicative of victory or success expected of the festival.

The room, Igbewaren' (an unusually high bed made of strong wood with ladder to climb for the Opha), 'Utughe' (make shift kitchen for all the cooking during the feast), the table constantly set before the 'Opha' during the day and all other materials bought by either the husband or parents constitute the props. As a traditional festival drama, all the things discussed under costume, make-up and props help in the full realization of characters in Udu female circumcision rite.

Characters

The characters in the female circumcision festival of the Udu people are the ones who have brought the crowd together. Without the characters, there would be no performance or audience or costume, make up and props. This also implies that there would be no festival. Character therefore, is a crucial dramatic element in the Udu female circumcision festival. The 'Opha' appears to be the main character or the protagonist. It is for her that the festival is organized. She is adored like a queen and does not engage in any strenuous activity. She is attended to by her 'Ikɔpha'. She sits on a beautifully decorated chair where she receives visitors. The mock sweeping, she does in her parent's in-law's

house where she bends her body lightly shows grace combined with industry. She thus, demonstrates her humility and readiness to see the parents in law.

The 'Ikopha', the 'Opha' attendants are like a bridal train. They are included among in the characters of the Udu female circumcision rite. Their role is also crucial. They accompany the 'Opha' wherever she goes and also run errands for her. Their own costumes are also spectacular. The Opha' selects her own 'Ikopha' and the number she selects is determined by the family's financial strength. During the Opha's outing ceremony, they come out in a colourful procession which is a spectacle to the eyes. It is an occasion to display pageantry and feminine beauty as they expose most parts of their body including their breasts to reveal softness and delicate curves. Many males seize the opportunity to choose their future bride. The 'Ukopha- Ukpe' (Chief bride's maid) is the closest to the 'Opha' and she does everything for the 'Opha' including bathing and taking care of her meals. The Ikopha also rubs camwood dye like the 'Opha'. Their appearance is suggestive of the festive mood that pervades the entire Udu community during the circumcision rite.

The Odede' and other priests are also some of the characters in the female circumcision rite. Their attire depicts their role as priests. They offer, sacrifices, prayers pour libations and chant incantations as they mediate between the living and the dead (ancestors). Other characters are the parents of the Opha, her husband and in-laws. They contribute financially, and emotionally to ensure the

success of the festival and the occasion. Every character plays his or her role with joy.

Audience

Audience as submitted by Ruth Finnegan (1976) is also an essential element of the festival. Arts belong to the people, so without the audience, the festival is incomplete. The audience is directly involved in the actualization and creation of the Udu female circumcision festival. JC de Graft (1976) confirms this when he says that "dramatic art in any developed form is essentially a commercial activity requiring not only the role player but also a supporting audience" (p. 11).

In the Udu female circumcision festival, there are.

- i The participating audience and
- ii. The main audience.

The participating audience consists of the entire Udu Community, young, old, male and female. Even when they are not the celebrants, they engage fully in different activities for the realization of a successful performance. The participating audience engages in singing, dancing, clapping, skipping and several other activities. They entertain while they are also entertained. The family members or relatives of the 'Opha' are included in the participating audience. The main audience is made up of well-wishers usually non-indigenes who are present to appreciate the art form and gain satisfaction from the performance. Attendance may be based on invitation and he/she is there to relax and enjoy himself/herself with a

beautiful piece of dramatic display. They also pass valuable judgment as they compare the present celebration with previous ones.

Stage or Performance Arena

A number of locations used during the circumcision rite become the stage or performance arena and they include: open space, ancient paths, stream side, village square or even town hall and the *Opha's* respective homes. Since the festival spans through a period of time, different events are slated for different days and these take place in different locations, each event like the opening ceremony which culminates in the proclamation is a complete one which makes up part of the whole experience of the Udu female circumcision rite. Stage is realized through subtlety of the physical space because there is no precise formulation or specifications as different people are involved year in year out. We regard these areas mentioned earlier as stage. Although they are not We sophisticated modern theatre space, they remain as performance arena as long as they provide the needed space for the characters to perform their various roles.

Artistic Relevance of the Udu Female Circumcision Festival

The study of this festival reveals that Udu people have great imaginative and creative skills which can open the audience minds' eyes to the beauty of art forms. This evidently shows that the Udu people have a rich artistic heritage. The festival in question is an interplay of creativity, artistry and tradition that offers an avenue to showcase

Udu's creative cultural skills. The following are notable facts about the Udu female circumcision festival:

- i. The people have a keen sense of aesthetics revealed in their creative and imaginative talents as a reflection of the African mind and artistry.
- ii. Costume, make up and props used on this occasion show a high degree of mastery in the art of decoration and creativity among the Udu people even prior to the advent of western civilization.
- iii. The art of oratory is seen as a talent endowed on the Udu people from the songs and other speech forms used during the occasion.

The priest displays a remarkable mastery of the art of oratory as he prays and chants incantation. He strikes his audience with awe in his readiness, and eloquence in speech. His prayer which is incantatory and poetic flows with a rhythmic pattern. He employs devices such as enjambment, symbolism and metaphor. These devices are utilized masterfully by the priest.

In commending or praising the *Opha*, there is the employment of metaphoric expressions such as *Ododo* which means flower. Her subtlety and roundness are described as *Vwurhievwurhie'*, *ghroghro* to denote plainness, *Omoṭe boroko* or *gbadaka*, *Ophatuetue* amongst others. All these praise words are ideophonic in nature and literary expressions of aesthetics. It should be noted that *boroko*, *gbadaka* and *tuetue* are adjectives which appear after the nouns

Omote and *Qpha* as against the convention of the English language where the adjective precedes the noun. In Urhobo language, the noun precedes the adjective in a noun phrase. Humour is also added to the occasion as certain expressions are employed to mock either the *Qpha*'s parents or the husband when their meals appear not to be delicious). Examples of such words are:

Okpaiku, *Ijeleba* are words which connote tastelessness. *Okibe* which means eunuch or *Omokriaghware* (castrated he goat) is employed to ridicule a young man who is not yet married on this occasion. In modern drama, the parallel is seen in the use of satire. Ridicule and satire are geared towards the same goal of correction.

Literary Analysis of Songs

A good number of songs are rendered repeatedly over the years and they remain the same without any significant alteration. Some are satirical in nature and others comprise elements of personification, repetition, metaphor mid rhythm. Only two of these songs will be considered in this paper.

Song 1

Ododo Vwurhie Vwurhie
Ododo Vwurhie Vwurhie
Ododo Vwurhie Omo rhe
Takpo Ovwote

Chorus: *Kovo omọ*
Takpo Ovwote

Chorus: *Kovo omọ*

Translation

Flower that is succulent (2 times)

Flower that is succulent turn offspring up provided it is touched

Chorus: It brings offspring Provided it is touched

Chorus: It brings offspring

This song is rendered as the *Qpha* leaves the parent's house where she has been all through the celebration period and returns to the husband's house. Here metaphor is employed in referring to her as flower. The *Qpha* is equated with a beautiful flower. There is the use of ideophones that is achieved through the reduplication of sounds, *Vwurhie* – *Vwurhie* used literarily to convey meaning as seen in the line *Takpovwote* (Provided it is touched), *Kovo omọ* the chorus suggest having children. Those two imply sexual intercourse between the *Qpha* and the husband and the resultant pregnancy and offspring.

Song II

Ibiegba re ha aye
OvwohoJavwhagho gho
Me vrabo re ta ewarien r' ovwoho
Me ra me rhe
Oserivhorokanrorere – e
Erhereribieba re ho vwoho
Sayenreheyarere?
Orilbiegbavworiugharen?
Diemuegbikurakponyori?
Me vaboretawarienrovwoho re
Oro mrevwen mi ye ruvve
Ibiegbavwaye re.

Translation

Bead has taken a wife
The town's people come and rejoice
I am free of town's ridicule
Let me go and return
A concubine is not difficult to get in town
The age grade of bead in town
Are they all married?
Why is Bead's case different?
What is the gossip all about?
I am free of the town's ridicule
Whoever sees me should congratulate me
Bead has a wife.

The song is also rendered on the 'Opha's return to her husband's house. It is marked with metaphor and other figurative expressions which include imagery, personification and rhetorical questions. 'Bead' in the song is personified and it represents the 'Opha's husband hence it is said to have married a wife. It simply communicates the husband's worth or high value as bead is a highly valued item among the Urhobos.

Line five illustrates the terseness of form but loaded with meaning. 'Osen' (concubine) represents the non-initiates who are very many and easy to get in the community as against the initiate who is truly a wife and duly initiated. This category of women is expensive and not common. The rhetorical questions help to achieve different effects. It is a challenge to other men whose wives have not been initiated. It also helps to check gossip going in the town. In lines 1,3 and 10, we find repetition for emphasis and it also creates structural effect. The above are but a few examples of songs rendered on the occasion of Udu female circumcision festival. Songs, as can be seen in the excerpts, are

significant literary expressions and artistic avenues through which we release our latent response energies.

Conclusion

It is worth noting that the Udu female circumcision rite is a traditional festival drama that is strongly rooted in the historical and cultural experiences of the Udu people. The festival satisfies the basic aesthetics, religious and social needs of the people with exciting dramatic qualities. Its conception, articulation and artistic development elevate African culture and tradition. It draws the people closer to their roots and helps to establish their identity and culture. For this reason, it should not be allowed to experience natural death as the practice is currently undergoing what could be termed 'extinction'. The dramatic aspect of the Udu female circumcision festival could be reawakened and brought to life like other important traditional festivals such as 'Osun Oshogbo' in Yoruba land.

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