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The Theatrics in Ebedebiri Amau-Aru (War Boat) Performance, Nigeria

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Abstract:

War boat is an aquatic performance re-enacted to show heroic deeds and exploits of warriors on how they conquered enemies and became victorious in battles. A study on the relevance of Ebedebiri war boat performance has never been an issue in scholarship; therefore, this study on 'The Theatrics in Ebedebiri Amau-arua (War Boat) Performance'. This essay discusses the theatrical disposition of Ebedebiri war boat performance and it highlights the performance elements related to African theatre used in it. The study identifies that war boat performance in Ebedebiri community helps to mirror the Ebedebiri society, preserve legends, myths and ridicule weaknesses. This work adopted the qualitative methodology of research. That is, the bulk of work data for this study came from the researcher's participation and observation of the 2012 Ebedebiri War Boat Performance in Ebedebiri Community and that of 2019 taken on tour to Warri Delta. The study concludes that Ebedebiri war boat performance is a tool for positive reconstruction. And it finds out that, the performance can be an avenue to sell the Ebedebiri society to international society. From this finding, it recommends that artistically trained theatre artists are needed to be consulted to be partakers of the performance in Ebedebiri community.

Keywords: Theatrics, Ebedebiri, war boat, Ekian-Aru, performance

1. Introduction

At the end of every calendar year, Ebedebiri community like most villages in Africa performs her cleansing ritual to usher in the New Year. Without this ritual, there is a belief that Ebedebiri community is fated to have bad harvests, deaths and minimal social lives. This ritual of annual cleansing becomes a religious and social-cultural tradition in the lives of Ebedebiri people. The cleansing ritual is done by chosen carriers who paddle in an ekian- aru (sacrificial boat) accompanied by the amau-arua (war boat) to the outskirts of the community carrying items symbolizing the evils of the past year, disposes these items into the river, performs necessary rituals in the river then returns back. The amau-arua in Ebedebiri community today is not only used for religious purpose but has evolved to a theatrical performance, therefore, has theatrical features and is the focus of this discourse.

2. Culture and History of Ebedebiri People

Ebedebiri people are believed to be descendants of the ancestor Tarakiri-Owei. Ebidor also called Eboto believed to be the original founder of Ebedebiri is a son to Tarakiri-owe. In Ijaw societies, clanship is dictated by ancestry and not by geography, therefore, Ebedebiri people lay claim to Tarakiri clan in Western Ijaw since they are descendants of Tarakiri-owe, the originator of Tarakiri clan. Tarakiri clan has a collection of communities spread across banks of the Nun and Forcados Rivers in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Most towns in the clan are however clustered close to the Tarakiri-Ogbesu (juju) shrine on the banks of Forcados River, the deity itself being integral to the culture of the Tarakiri people. Thirteen communities constitute the clan, they are: Adoubo, Agbere, Agbidiana, Angalabiri, Ayamasa, Bolou-orua, Ebedebiri, Egbemo-Angalabiri, Igbidiana, Isampou, Oduovbari, Ofoni and Toru-orua.

Geographically, Ebedebiri community is settled in Igbedi Creeks of Sagbama Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. The Igbedi Creek is a tributary of the Forcados River which empties its content into the Forcados Sea. The people of Ebedebiri speak the Ijaw dialect, a closely related Niger-Congo language. However, due to modernism, the second language of the people is the vernacular English. In the current political division of Nigeria, the community is settled under ward five in Sagbama local government area and the district headquarters of Tarakiri clan in Bayelsa State.

Ebedebiri community is always bustling with activities. Farming is the major occupation of Ebedebiri people. They carry out farming on fish, cocoa yams, plantains, cassava, yams, and fruits such as mangoes, guava and trade in smoked fish, timbre and palm oil.

3. A Discourse on War Boat

War boat is one of the commonest riverine performances in Ijaw land. It is a re-enactment of the heroic deeds and exploits of warriors on how they conquered enemies and became victorious in battles. Ijaw people live in a coastal environment, therefore, all their battles they encountered, fought and won are riverine. To re-enact these battles to eager

villagers who want to know how brave their warriors are and to encourage incoming warriors, decided to re-enact the war act on a boat. And this act of re-enactment began the war boat performance in Ijaw land. Ernest (2017) says that war boat performance is done these days to honour special dignitaries or pay special tribute to very great warriors in the event of their death (31).

4. War Boat Performance in Ebedebiri Community

In Ebedebiri community, war boat performance is grouped into two categories, the sacred and ceremonial (theatrical) performance. The sacred war boat performance accompanies the Ebedebiri annual cleansing ritual as a protector against enemies who may dare to attack the ekian-aru. The outskirts of Ebedebiri is the beginning of a neighbouring community, and the people believes that once the ekian-aru deposits its symbolic sacrificial materials in their water, the evils in Ebedebiri will be transferred to them therefore send warriors to attack the Ebedebiri ekian-aru. The people of Ebedebiri prepare the sacred war boat to wade off perceived enemies from neighbouring communities who will dare to stop the ekian-aru in the river. The war boat is manned by warriors from Ebedebiri who are painted in war camouflage, brandishing weapons, burning charms in pots and chanting war songs, along with conspicuous arrays of raffia fronds and other bullet-proofing charms.

Ebedebiri community being an Izon community lives by the river; therefore, almost all battles embarked on by the community's warriors are fought on water. Reenacting these wars to honour dignitaries or to pay tribute to very great warriors in event of their death leads to the ceremonial war boat regatta. The war boat is manned by warriors costumed in war regalia, brandishing weapons and chanting war songs. The war boat performance in honour of a deceased warrior has in the war canoe a warrior who will role play (act) as the late warrior to be honoured showing some of his exploits while accompanying the ekian-aru and challenging daring neighbours wanting to cut off pot of charms that are symbolically tied at rear end of the boat. This act of role play birthed the ceremonial war boat performance in Ebedebiri. The ceremonial war boat performance is today staged to entertain audience during special occasions. For example, in 2012, the war boat was staged to entertain the then Bayelsa state governor, Henry Seriake Dickson when he came on a thank you visit to the community after been reelected as governor of Bayelsa State.



Figure 1: Ebedebiri War Boat
Ebedebiri Ceremonial War Boat, 2012

5. Performance Elements in Ebedebiri the War Boat

Performance aesthetics is appreciated when a director knows the right combination of performance elements. According to Ohiri theatrical elements are those material resources which the director and manager combine with the human resources of the theatre to enhance a production (2010: 10). Krama in speaking about performance elements in African performance says, 'theatre elements in African drama are inter-related and complex because these elements form the communal way of expression and its basis for traditional heritage. And the elements are essential part of the theatre and embody the aesthetics of the traditional African community' (20). He explained further by saying that the elements of African drama are rituals, speech surrogates, instrumental sounds, costumes, drama audience, actors, gods, etc. (20). Similarly, Obafemi (2001) states that 'for an action to be called theatrical, characteristics such as presence of dramatis personae or performers, artificiality, arena or stage, impersonation or mimesis, loose end, theme (purposefulness), costume and makeup, must be visibly seen in that performance' (48). The Ebedebiri war boat can be called theatre because all the aforementioned components are present in its performance and these elements make the aesthetics of the war boat performance. How the elements apply to the war boat is discussed below:

5.1. Music and Dance

Music design and drama have played important roles in the evolution of dance in the theatrical war boat performance. Music as an element helps to establish the desired mood and atmosphere in the war boat. As the warriors who are to be in the war boat of Ebedebiri march to the river with the surging crowd/audience, the drummers who are also warriors seemingly possessed play with alacrity and agility tunes accompanied with songs rehearsed. The songs used for the performance are handed down from one generation to the other; hence are fixed.

kuku baghaseina
odukuku baghaseina

dark beast that cannot be killed is on rampage
dark beast is on rampage

The lead vocalist raises the song and other performers respond to its call-in unison. The songs are ethnic/traditional Ijaw songs.

aforukpopagha benibulor torubeneye
agadagba
aforukpopgha benibulor yarinde ye
agadagba
boubakemiebaye kemenagha ye...

The misty sea is now to be crossed,
agadagaba (god of war)
The misty sea is now shaky
agadagaba (god of war)
now I cannot tell what happened to people around.

The music determines the style or dramatic quality of the dancing. The song that signals the returning of the war boat from the river to the shore is raised in a very high tempo and the performers celebrate with joy as they respond to it:

ebo amalede eboamalede
ebo amaledayo yo yo
ebo amalade eboamalade
kemeseboseyo

I am back from the war
I am back from the war
I am back I am back
Let us all come and celebrate

In the war boat performance, the dancing is well choreographed to make sure the boat does not topple or lose its stage balance. Agene and Owigiri are the major dance steps in Ebedebiri war boat performance. The agenedance is accompanied with traditional juju drum beats. The lead drum which is a talking drum frequently signals rise and fall of rhythm. The warriors start the performance with the agene dance step in the shrine and when they get into the war boat, they combine both the owigiri and a gene to the delight of the audience. The element of dance, in war boat performance falls into two categories, the dancing of the audience in the avenue (shoreline) stage and that by the performers in the floating stage and then to the fluid stage.

When the performance moves to the floating stage the audience dance and clap to rhythms on the shore. Even, some audience members use sticks as clapping objects. The clapping and singing of dancers unite both spectators and actors helping them to clear their minds of everyday preoccupation. The dance itself involves energetic stamping of feet with the waist and chest shaking vigorously. When the tempo of the song is slow, the dancers move bodies languidly to the tempo.

5.2. Scenery and Costume

The Ebedebiri natural environment provides the needed scenery for the performance. The community is kept very clean on the day of the performance. Four days to the day of the performance, the community leader calls on the youths to be gathered in the community hall and tasks them with the cleaning of the community. Two days cleaning will be done by the youths, this they do having in mind that visitors will be coming in to the community for the Ebedebiri war boat performance (celebration). However, there is a fine to be paid by those who default in coming out to clean the community. The trees, grasses and the path ways all create the needed aesthetics to the scenery of the Ebedebiri community.

Every participant, warrior and participant-audience wear some costume. The audience wears their daily routine clothing to go out and be entertained in the war boat performance. In the case of the warriors, they are gaily dressed in black. Some of them use charcoal to paint their faces black while some even wear face mask. Others tie fresh raffia palms round their heads to signify their invincible to perceived enemies.



Figure 2: Actors costumed for a War Boat Performance
Ebedebiri War Boat on Tour at Beke-Ebi Lake-Side Hotel, Warri, 2019

Okieazi Weridongha, the actor in fig.2 second from right, in an oral interview said when they are dressed and starts singing and drumming, they don't think of anything else but are ready for any battle. He said, 'When I am prepared in the shrine and sent out, it is like a new spirit has entered into me'. Costumes and ornaments such as guns are an embellishment to the performance; they help in the portrayal of character.

The performance takes place in the daytime like the ancient Greeks' performance, with the natural light (sunlight) giving the needed illumination. Paddling in the water can't be done in the night because there is no electricity nor can light be taken to the shrine of the god(s) which is against the tradition therefore the designers and performers resort to using sunlight to give the needed light aesthetics.

5.3. Performers and Audience

The actors in Ebedebiri war boat create an experience that is a recreation of reality. The performance follows the precepts laid down by the historical prototype, looking more like the actual experience. The war boat performance has the potential to significantly change lives because audience members come to know about the culture and history of Ebedebiri people. The audience is a participatory one; they chorus songs in a call and response pattern, clap and dance to the rhythms, while freely interacting with performers.



Figure 3: The Participatory Audience Floating with the Performance
Ebedebiri War Boat Performance, 2012

6. Artificiality

Actions in the war boat are representational. It is with the view that art is a reflection of reality. Thus, the rituals carried out in the ceremonial war boat performance are not sacred but artificial. Most of the makeup worn by the actors and the palm frond tied round the floating stage are all representational and as symbolic objects are communicative codes. Alexander et al., state that 'in symbolizing actors' and audiences' worlds, narratives and codes simultaneously condense and elaborate, and they employ a wide range of rhetorical devices, from metaphor to synecdoche, to configure social and emotional life in compelling and coherent ways' (2006: 33). Also, body painting with black colours and wearing of black clothes is a symbolic way of warding off evil spirits. Through the painting, masking, and reconfiguring of the physical body, the actors are completely transformed and in their new embodiment of a human and totemic image 'man and God'. The actors are given the responsibility to convince the audience that the performance, guns, costumes and make-up are real.



Figure 4: Actors Imitating Warriors in a War Boat Performance
Ebedebiri War Boat Performance, 2012

6.1. Impersonation or Mimesis

Imitation is an innate quality of human beings. Children learn to talk, play and do all things imitating the actions they see around. Just like the aquatic ritual performance coming into existence because of actors imitating warriors who conquered their enemies in other empires. Olaniyan in an article *An Appraisal of Osun Osogbo Festival as a Festival Theatre* quoted Ola Rotimi as saying theatre within a cultural setting, at any rate implies an imitation of action ... or a person or person in action; the ultimate objective of which is to edify or to entertain, sometimes to do both. Actors present themselves as being motivated by and towards existential, emotional, and moral concerns. These bear meanings which are defined by patterns of signifiers whose referents are the social, physical, natural, and cosmological worlds within which actors and audience live.

In the secular war boat theatre, participants not only imitate the movements of warriors or preys but also use weapons, masks and make-up to heighten the realism of the performance as shown in fig. 4 above.

6.2. Commuality

The war boat performance is communal in nature, only indigenes of Ebedebiri community are allowed to partake in the war boat (i.e., are permitted in the war boat), both the sacred and secular performances. It also serves as a medium of integration, bringing the people together despite their political and religious differences. Often times, indigenes of Ebedebiri who live in the city travel back to the village to partake in the festivity which the war boat performance brings.

7. Cultural Valuation of the Ebedebiri War Boat Performance

Sociologically, the war boat performance serves a wide variety of functions in Ebedebiri community. Scenes in the performance mirror the society, preserves legends, myths and ridicule weaknesses. The performance like drama evolves from the people's culture therefore; they (the people) being already part and parcel of the exercise participate willingly. Listed below are some importances of the Ebedebiri theatrical war boat performance.

- War boat performance been highly entertaining conforms to the entertainment vision of a theatrical performance.
- The re-enactment of Ebedebiri war boat performance as a theatrical form is significant in providing a platform for the preservation of the Ebedebiri cultural heritage. Not only does it provide an avenue for the transition of knowledge; it also promotes communal experiences. In other words, it has proved to be another source of the cultural enlightenment to the younger generation of Ebedebiri people, thus establishing a good link between the old and the new breed of Ebedebiri people.
- By the communal spirit of oneness established during its performance, the theatrical reenactment of the Ebedebiri war boat performance has proved to be a factor of fostering unity among Ebedebiri people.
- The performance is also used to harness the talents of youths. When selecting the key performers, there is usually hunt for specific skills in singing, dancing, drumming, carving, sewing, building and painting just to mention a few. This has led to the discovery of a chain of new talents, marked out and nurtured for immediate and future use.

8. Conclusion, Findings and Recommendations

In conclusion, the Ebedebiri war boat performance is a tool for reconstruction, communicative and entertainment. With its values communicated to the audience, their social views will be reconstructed through their communication with the performance though they are entertained. This coheres with Krama's vision that African drama/theatre should play three main functions of reconstruction, communication and entertainment (Krama, 2006: 35).

Looking at the different aspects of the war boat performance, this study observed that the theatrical war boat performance can be an ideal source to sell the Ebedebiri community to the outer world (international community) considering the response and great turn out of indigenes and strangers within and outside the community. And if Ebedebiri war boat performance is well packaged and publicized, it could become a tourist attraction and a source for economic empowerment to the Ebedebiri community and her people.

Based on the findings above, this work recommends that the ceremonial war boat performance not only involve indigenes from Ebedebiri alone but staff from the Bayelsa State Council for Art and Culture, and other practicing theatre practitioners who are artistically endowed to help Ebedebiri community package a performance worthy of attracting tourists from far and near.

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