

Transforming Myths and Rituals into Theatre: The Ogoni Experience in Dezua (New Yam Festival)

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Abstract

In traditional societies, myths and rituals are veritable components of religious observances. In the Ogoni case, they are the core of the organization of festivals. This paper discusses the celebration of Dezua (new yam festival) of the Ogoni people. The paper observes that dramatic performances staged during the festival, having been transformed of their inherent myths and rituals, could pass for dramatic spectacles. Bearing in mind that several views have been expressed regarding what should or should not constitute drama in traditional African setting, the paper, having examined those views, argues that Ogoni traditional drama, especially those of the new yam festival, in their transformed myths and rituals state, are theatrical in so far as they (the dramatic performances) exhibit the features of Oxtodox theatre such as: music, drama, performers, audience, stage and makeup. The incidence of myths and rituals in African traditional performances and in particular, that of the Ogoni, the paper argues further, is to mark the distinctiveness of the people culturally. The paper concludes that Ogoni new yam festival performances have the force of drama and therefore qualify as events for the theatre.

Keywords: Ogoni, Myth, Ritual, Dezua, Festival and Theatre

1.1 Introduction

In *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Wole Soyinka shows clearly that Africa is a cultural entity, a world by itself with its history, its social neuroses and its value systems (3). Ogoni, like Africa, as seen by Soyinka is a cultural entity. Divided into the six kingdoms of Nyo-Khana, Ken Khana, Babbe, Gokana, Tai and Eleme, Ogoni is known for its cultural heritage. One very unique avenue through which Ogoni cultural experiences are showcased is festival organization. In festivals, Ogoni belief system, dominated by myths and rituals is revealed. In festivals still, Ogoni crafts, music, stories, dance and indeed, the totality of its art forms are reflected. Some of the known festivals in Ogoni-Land include: Dezua (new yam festival), Mii Giaa festival of Baranyonwa Dere, Amanikpo or Naabiradee festival, Yaa (Manhood initiation) festival, Ikpong festival of the Kpean people to mention a few.

To be able to give an undiluted account of Ogoni festivals, especially the new yam festival which is the thrust of this paper, there is the need to leap the present into the period before the coming of the force of modernity which altered and in most cases, rendered most of Ogoni festivals and other traditional practices out of existence. Ogoni traditional theatre is festival Oriented. Beside the myths and rituals that originate the festivals, the dramatic performances that come thereafter are quite amazing to behold. Oyin Ogunba, writing on traditional African drama asserts that:

The festival is not merely a religious occasion.

In its realization, a festival's religious foundation is often tied to a veritable carnival of dance drama and ritual drama. It is in this sense that the festival is the prime artistic institution of traditional Africa (5).

The attempt to document the organization of new yam festival of the Ogoni people as it was from the beginning of time is in a way, to rescue the Ogoni past from its seeming state of cultural extinction and to reassert the fact that Ogoni festivals have great potentials as events for the theatre. What this paper intends to achieve for the Ogoni is in a way, what *Things Fall Apart* did to Africa. An African writer once writes that the purpose of Chinua Achebe in the novel mentioned above was to rescue the African past from the colonial misrepresentation and biased to which it had been subjected.

To Achebe, the African world before the arrival of Europe was a well integrated one, with dignity and honour... as a story of the tragic encounter between Africa and Europe, *Things Fall Apart* is an attempt

to capture and restate the pristine integrity which has been so traumatically shattered by that confrontation (Awoonor 252).

What is most pertinent in this paper however, is the angle of the argument. Should performances of the new yam festival of the Ogoni people be termed as drama considering the fact that those performances are heralded by myths and rituals? The analysis before this paper will provide the way forward.

1.2 Objectives of the paper

The objectives of this paper are to:

- Identify the Ogoni as a cultural entity.
- determine the theatrical nature of performances of Ogoni new yam festival
- Assess the place of myths and rituals in the performances of Ogoni new yam festival.
- Assess the literary value of performances of the festival.
- Critique an argument why performances of Ogoni new yam festival should be seen as events for the theatre.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

In the study of Ogoni oral literature, “what is acted”, dominates its traditional theatre. Festival performances, showcasing masquerades of various forms, spirit cult enactments, myth stories, ritual observances and dance drama are events within the domain of what is acted.

As at the time of this research, the aspects of Ogoni oral literature that have to do with ‘what is spoken’ and ‘what is sung’ have been explored to some extent. For instance, in 1991, Ken Saro-Wiwa Published the first Ogoni collection of folktales titled *The singing Anthill*. In 1992, John Naale also contributed to this area of Ogoni Literature by publishing *The Adventures of Kuru*. In the domain of songs, both Ken Saro-Wiwa and Barine Saana Ngaage have made significant contributions. Saro-Wiwa’s *Songs in a Time of War* and Ngaage’s Doctoral and Master’s Thesis: “Songs of Abuse and Praise” and “Satire in Nkoo, Nkooto Songs” respectively are relevant in this consideration.

In the light of the above, the oral genre “what is acted” is yet to be explored. This study seeks to open up studies in this genre by looking at Ogoni traditional theatre and the impact of festivals on it. It is hoped that this attempt will snowball into a full scale research into this area of Ogoni literature.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This paper seeks to establish the fact that Ogoni festival performances, especially those of the new yam are theatrical in nature, the incidence of myths and rituals notwithstanding. This premise of the argument finds expression in Richard Schechner’s Performance Theory which is adopted for this paper as its theoretical framework.

Richard Schechner’s Performance Theory

Schechner’s perspective on performance is broad and inclusive. This theory is founded on certain Key Principles such as ‘presentation of self’ ‘restored behaviour’

'expressive culture' and it also incorporates social drama and ritual. Schechner's concept of performance asserts the importance of different systems of transformations which vary significantly from culture to culture. However, in this paper, the theory is looked at from its theatre angle. In this direction, it is important to state that Schechner's theory of performance is all encompassing and its approach to theatre performance is holistic. Schechner asserts that performing on stage, performing in special social situations (public ceremonies) and performing in everyday life are a continuum (143).

By this assertion, Schechner means to say that drama is not basically a province of the stage. An individual in his house could be a performer hence the often quoted lines from William Shakespeare's *As you like it* appears relevant to his view: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players...." (Act II, Scene Vii). In Schechner's performance theory as it concerns traditional theatre, there is a relationship between ritual and theatre and the fact that social performances are events for the theatre as well. It is in this direction that this theory is considered apt for this paper. In Schechner's view, **context**, rather than **structure** distinguishes ritual, entertainment and ordinary life from one another (30). The transformation of ritual into theatre is insinuated in Schechner's theory. This is the thrust of this paper. That although Ogoni new yam festival begins with myths and rituals, these are transformed into theatre in the dramatic performances of Ogoni festival plays such as Waalu and Karikpo.

Thus, it is convincing to say that a ritual becomes entertainment once it is outside its original context or when the belief that sustains it has lost its potency (Ogunbiyi ed. 155). And if entertainment is indeed an important component of drama then the performances of Waalu and Karikpo festival plays of the Ogoni, with their entertainment capacity, are to say the least, events for the theatre.

2.0 Conceptual Issues

2.1 Myth

From the exposition by Emile Durkheim's School of Sociology, Myth represents a projection of social and cultural patterns upward onto a superhuman level that sanctions and stabilizes the secular ideology (52).

Myth, according to Hugh Holman and William Harmon, "is an anonymous story or stories having roots in the primitive folk beliefs of races or nations and presenting supernatural episodes as a means of interpreting natural events in an effort to make concrete and particular, a special perception of human beings or a cosmic view" (317).

Every human society has its literature and hence, its mythology. Research has shown that there are common themes in the discussion of myth. These themes are woven around creation, divinity, religion, reality of existence and death, account of natural phenomenon and sometimes, adventures of great heroes.

In the Ogoni situation, we have the *akinàm* (totem) myth. In this myth, the Ogoni man or woman believes that in the forest, water and other known habitats, his or her *akinàm* lives. Anything that is injurious to the totem affects the living person at home. As we have the most elderly person within a given family so the totems are in their habitats. That we are saved from attacks and accidental death is just because our totems are careful and protective. There are other myths in Ogoniland that sustain traditional beliefs. There is the yam myth, Kawaabari myth to mention a few.

2.2 Ritual

The word ritual, as a noun means a religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed to a prescribed order.

Rituals are known to human societies. Just as one cannot envision a society without language one would be equally hard pressed to imagine a society without ritual (Donald Brown, 139). In the Ogoni case, the incidence of ritual acts is so much tied to religious

practices. Whether it is in the signification of the celebration of a festival, outing of a cultural display, crowning of a traditional chief, initiation into manhood or womanhood, observance of a solemn feast and other such related events, the observation of the accompanied rituals remain sacrosanct.

2.3 Theatre

A theatre could be modern or traditional. It is synonymous with drama. This paper discusses the concept of theatre from the angle of performances of traditional societies. Traditional theatre is a conglomerate of forms of drama. In the Ogoni case, such forms like ritual, dance, mime, storytelling, puppetry and ritual drama exist. Interestingly, Ogoni theatre incorporates actors, plots, dialogue, rehearsals, props, costumes, masks and makeup. In Ogoni, as in Africa, the concept of theatre is fluid. Performances could be carried out any where provided there is space in such places. This explains why Ogoni theatre could best be described as a moving type.

2.4 Festival

A festival could be a day celebration for religious purposes or a series of plays celebrated by a community to reflect aspects of the community's tradition. The celebration of festivals does give the celebrating community a sense of oneness and provided an avenue for entertainment of the people. Festivals that are woven around cultural events such as the Ogoni, have the potentials of bringing to memory the community's traditions and practices and serve as means of uniting the people. The festival periods in Ogoniland are periods of relaxation, happiness, and to live joyfully, forgetting all the not so good events of the past only to be filled with fresh and new hopes for a new beginning. Because the Ogoni are essentially farmers, their most prominent festival--- the new yam festival is associated with agriculture. In the celebration of this festival, the yam myth called "Ziagwe" by the Sogho people is made manifest.

Thus, to the Ogoni, festivals could be seen to perform the following:

- Identify with Ogoni culture, traditions, values and practices
- Document Ogoni history in an undocumented manner
- Expose the people to their worldview
- Pull together the people for purposes of celebration
- Ignite faith in the people about the traditional beliefs that identify the Ogoni as a cultural entity.

Every culture has its own festivals and each one festival has a traditional story associated with it. The new yam festival (Dezua) is one of the several festivals known in Ogoniland.

2.5 Tradition

As a noun, tradition means the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation. On the other hand, it is a continuing pattern of culture, beliefs or practices. The Ogoni tradition is informed by its worldview. In festivals, burial rites, initiation into manhood and womanhood, coronation of traditional chiefs and other Ogoni practices, we come face to face with established traditions. However, these traditions have been impacted negatively since the coming of modernity.

Modernity came with several factors such as industrialization, globalization assimilation or marginalization of specific cultural groups. All of these have affected the communal observances of Ogoni traditions.

3.0 Divergent Views on What Constitutes African Drama

Available Literature from some western and African Scholars on the subject matter of what should or should not constitute African drama have left much to be desired. This paper is of the opinion that traditional African theatre, where the Ogoni festival performances are

located, has not been properly assessed. To confront these views is to be abreast with the contentions of scholars of the relativist and the evolutionary schools of thought.

3.1 Relativist School of Thought

The bone of contention in the argument of what should or should not be termed drama in the African context is the myth, ritual component of African drama. Richard Schechner, a western scholar, whose performance theory, as it affects traditional theatre is adopted for this paper as theoretical framework is of the Relativist school of thought. According to him, 'Context' not fundamental structure, distinguishes ritual, entertainment and ordinary life from one another. A ritual can easily be transformed into theatre and vice versa – in a number of ways and that a ritual becomes entertainment once it is outside its original context or when the belief that sustains it has lost its potency (qtd in Ogunbiyi ed.155).

An African scholar and a leading voice of the relativist school of thought, Ossie Enekwe also said that 'Context' and 'form' are two elements that should be considered in the judgement of what should be classified as drama in the African setting. He asserts that "drama and ritual are not anti-podal but rather reciprocal in function and similar in structure since one can easily lead to the other, depending on the context" (qtd in Ogunbiyi ed.6). The position of other African scholars such as Ola Rotimi and Adedeji J.A also lend credence to Enekwe's views

By their arguments, Ogoni festival plays, having been transformed of their ritual contents, have the force of drama within the context of traditional theatre. The ritual aspect of Ogoni new yam festival for example, merely heralds the well planned and structured performances that are staged thereafter to commemorate the festival.

3.2 The Evolutionary School of Thought

Scholars of the evolutionary school of thought, whether African or western seem not to have given African traditional theatre its deserved place when it comes to the issue of what should be termed dramatic performances. They tend to base their argument on certain western criteria such as enactment, of representation through actors, plot, the represented interaction of several characters, specialized scenery, dance and music (Ruth Finnegan 501). By this argument, Meki Nzewi is considered to have stultified the supposed nature of African drama when he said.

What is usually called traditional drama Is not drama, it is the legacy upon which drama may draw and draw with ever increasing returns.., what some usually and glibly call traditional drama is purely and essentially element of drama (5).

Corroborating Nzewi's position, a leading voice of the evolutionary school, Echeruo M.J.C, using Finnegan as his standpoint, maintains that there are considerable limitations to be encountered in any attempt to classify Igbo festival as drama. According to him:

Until the ritual content of Igbo festival (for example,

Mbom-Ama and Odo festivals) is forced to yield its story, the dramatic content of these festivals will remain subsumed in their ritual purity (qtd in Ogunbiyi ed.7).

In the context of this paper, the expressed views of the evolutionary scholars are not without ambivalence. The seeming prejudice appears to anchor on certain western dramatic praxis among which are: evidence of a developed plot, character, linguistic content, thought, audience, costumes, to mention a few Nevertheless, these elements are equally noticeable in traditional African drama. The incidences of myths and rituals which characterize African traditional theatre notwithstanding African traditional performances, with their entertaining capacity, have the force of theatre. After all, the origin of drama or theatre in the western world could still be traced to have evolved out of religious rituals and myth stories. The Greek celebrations in honour of the Greek god Dionysus is a case in point.

4.0 Ogoni New Yam Festival

Of the numerous festivals that are known in Ogoniland, the new yam festival (Dezua) is the most common and outstanding. This festival is celebrated along community line. The account of the festival as given in this paper is that of the people of Sogho, Kaani and Tee of Tai in Khana and Tai Local Government Areas of Rivers State. The research conducted reveals that Ogoni new yam festival is celebrated to:

- Mark the beginning of the harvest of their most staple food---yam, and prepare them for the new farming year.
- Perform the yearly purification rite which is done to strengthen the people spiritually and keep them in good health to face the activities of the coming year.
- Teach the young, the importance of their traditions and thus, rekindle their faith in them.

4.1 The Ritual Aspect of the Festival

Research has shown that Ogoni new yam festival (Dezua) begins with elaborate rituals. In Tai kingdom for example, the festival can only get started when the priest of Loogbeneagbenebe must have performed the rite of Apaago (eagle feather's ritual). To do this, a date is chosen in the month of July of a given year. That date must fall on Deekor in Ogoni Calendar. On this day, and at the shrine of Loogbeneagbenebe, situated in Korokoro Tai, the traditional base of the festival, traditionalists from the represented forty (40) villages making up Tai Kingdom would gather. The priest will then be required to perform the symbolic Apaago ritual ceremony. He begins by offering libation to the ancestors and after a level of intense incantation; he throws the eagle's feather into the space. Two things are expected at this point of the ceremony. The eagle's feather will either return from the space and stand erect on the ground or gets flattened. Traditionally, when the feather returns and stands erect before the devotees at the shrine, it signifies that the year's festival is approved and endorsed by the gods but where it gets flattened on the ground, it portends danger and failure for that year's festival. If the latter becomes the case in any one Apaago ritual ceremony, the keepers of the shrine of Loogbeneagbenebe will immediately offer the necessary sacrifices. Once it is corrected, the priest announces the commencement of the festival.

In the Sogho experience, the ritual processes of the new yam festival are more elaborate. First, there has to be the deification of all the traditional deities across the six villages of Sogho. By this, Asaán, Bukue, Barinòn, Kàràyiira, Atelka, Atáågbara and Gbènèsigere are remembered in sacrifices and are in turn invoked to be present spiritually during the annual festival of the new yam. All these must be observed before fixing a particular date in August of a given year for the festival. As in Tai Kingdom, where the right of performing the Apaago rite is that of the priest of Loogbeneagbenebe, in Sogho, it is the "Gara clan" The day on which the ceremony is performed is also Deekor as in Tai Kingdom.

On this day, the custodians of Bari-Sogho from the Gara Clan would gather at the shrine of Atelka situated in Akporo Sogho and will, while there, perform the ritual of burying a fresh jar of palm wine which by custom, is dug out the following day being Deemua in Ogoni calendar. This rite, like the Apaago own of the Tai people, usually gives way to the other rituals which begin the following day, Deebom (Sogho market day). As is the custom, the traditional keepers of the Gara clan will file round the villages of Sogho, digging and uprooting freely the various yam species planted by the people within the neighbourhood. These are loaded in a traditional basket of a cylindrical shape, adorned with pieces of black and white cloth dotted with blood stains.

As the Dubom market of the Sogho people gets full on that same day (Deebom), the devotees from Gara Clan move into the market and to the shrine of "Yor Du" where the breaking of kolanut, libation and other ritual performances are observed. The ritual procession from the market takes them to the final point at Teka Sogho. It is in Teka and at the shrine of Bari-Sogho that the items in the basket are shared to all the house deities that

were visited during the ritual procession. Once these rituals have been brought to a conclusion on Deebom, new things (Aànu) like pumpkin leaves, maize, yam species from the farm can then be eaten by traditionalists, priests of various deities and custodians of traditions.

In Kaani, a close community to Sogho, performance of the new yam festival rituals is the traditional right of the custodians of Gbeneakpan clan. In the Kaani account, the breaking of Kolanut, libation to the ancestors and other necessary rites begin on Deeson while the festival starts the following day – Deekor.

4.2 The Dramatic Aspect of the Festival

By the research conducted, once the rituals have been concluded, the dramatic aspect of the celebration follows. From community to community, village to village, the dramatic aspect of Ogoni new yam festival is celebrated with joy. A number of dramatic performances are staged to commemorate the festival. Often than not, these performances are masquerade in form. The most common is the the Waalu or Nnuwaalo as called by the Tai people. Other dramatic plays that are staged during the festival include: Nbiudam, Teebee, Kparakua, Karikpo and in some communities, Wrestling Contest. Ruth Finnegan, in describing the most prevalent plays in the southern part of West Africa writes that:

The masquerades – dances of masked figure of various kinds probably vary throughout the region in content, purpose and pattern, but they all seem to include certain element of drama and are often referred to as “plays” (509).

The festival has fifteen days, known in Ogoni calendar as “taaeere” to stay on. Dramatic performances within these days, normally recycle around the days in Ogoni calendar – Deekor, Deemua, Deebom, Deezian and Deeson. Just as the festival gets started through the observances of certain rituals so it is concluded with the purification rite ceremony.

4.3 Performances of the Festival as Events for the Theatre

A literary scholar in the study of African literature has advanced certain characteristics that must typify performances to be described as festival oriented. These, according to him, include: audience, performers, stage, mimesis, purposefulness, costumes, procedural and communal (Obafemi Olu, 48). Each of the above is further explained below to demonstrate their relatedness to the performances of Ogoni new yam festival.

4.3.1 Audience

Ogoni new yam festival performances can best be described as crowd pulling. In the case of Waalu, the various parts or routes within the celebrating community are peopled. The audience of Karikpo, another new yam festival play is usually at a point, at best, the community town’s square. Both plays have several masquerades in one organized performance. While the Waalu Masquerades scatter everywhere within the community of performance, with each masker having its crowd to chase, Karikpo maskers perform at a central point with surging crowd watching the performances.

4.3.2 Performers

A theatre, whether modern or traditional must have performers. In the Ogoni situation, the theatre is a moving type. It is not fixed. Though, performers in the theatre world imply, actors and actresses, in the Ogoni case, and in the case of the new yam festival performance, it is only the actors that perform because it is forbidden for women to be seen masquerading. They are usually part of the participatory audience, singing and dancing around the masquerades as in the Karikpo example or they watch from a distance and are chased in the course of the performance as is the case of Waalu.

4.3.3 Stage

The new yam festival performances are staged. In the Karikpo case, the stage could be the main town's square of the celebrating community, the school premises, the market place or any other open space within the community. In the Waalu example, the stage is the entire celebrating community because the masquerades do roam the nooks and crannies of the community while displaying.

4.3.4 Mimesis

Mimesis means imitation. In the Karikpo masquerade display, there are lots of mimicking. Various animals like the antelope, elephant, fox and monkeys are imitated in quality and in mannerism in course of the performance. In support of this device, Ola Rotimi, in his definition of traditional theatre asserts that theatre within a cultural setting, at any rate, implies an imitation of action or a person or persons in action, the ultimate objective of which is to edify or to entertain, sometimes to do both "(77).

4.3.5 Purposefulness

Dramatic performances of the Ogoni new yam festival actually serve some purposes. They provide avenue for relaxation, encourage oneness and more than that, they entertain the people.

4.3.6 Costumes

In the staging of the Waalu and the karikpo plays, elaborate use of costumes is required. There is the use of massive grass known as "sèngè" on the body of the Waalu maskers. This encourages and give them a fierce look. In karikpo, the costumes range from the use of coloured raffia leaves, beads, rings of bell around waist, assorted application of indigo and variety of mask types.

4.3.7 Procedural

Ogoni new yam festival is not just celebrated. It follows a regimented procedure. There are fixed days during which performances are allowed. And all performances must be brought to a close on a particular day in Ogoni calendar. These make the activities of the festival to be procedural.

4.3.8 Communal

This is a unique feature of the festival. It is communally owned and so it is communally celebrated. Ogoni new yam festival normally brings home sons and daughters of the celebrating community who may have left home in search of livelihood to reunite with their kith and kin. The festival encourages togetherness and opens up avenues for love and unity.

5.0 Conclusion

Ogoni new yam festival (Dezua) remains one of the most unique traditional festivals in Ogoniland. Its celebration links the living with the ancestors and rekindles faith in Ogoni traditional beliefs. In it, Ogoni world view, its crafts and creativity are demonstrated. The performances of Ogoni new yam festival plays are indeed theatrical. They can be sources of revenue to a community, a local government, a state and a Nation if well harnessed and developed. In conclusion therefore, Ogoni new yam festival performances when transformed of its myths and rituals qualify as theatrical events with tourist potentials.

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