



Theatricality and Social Functions in *Erishi* Festival of the Ase Community in Delta State

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Abstract

This paper explores the theatricality and social functions in Erishi Festival of Ase in Ndokwa East Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. Festivals are integral to the cultural life of a people; they establish identity and foster social cohesion. Although the Erishi Festival is largely unknown outside Delta State, it remains a unifying event that embodies both social functions and theatrical elements. Unfortunately, some scholars of African traditions have downplayed the potential of indigenous festivals due to the long-standing debate over Western notions of what constitutes drama. Consequently, there is little recognition of the value of such festivals beyond their entertainment aspects. This study adopts Richard Schechner's Performance Theory and Aristotle's Theory of Drama as its theoretical framework, employing literary and analytical methodologies. The findings reveal that the Erishi Festival embodies numerous social functions and theatrical elements. The paper recommends that scholars of African traditions should look beyond the entertainment dimension, since the festival encapsulates rich cultural values capable of fostering socio-cultural transformation within the African universe.

Key Words: Social Functions, Festivals, Rituals, Theatrical Elements, Performance

Introduction

Festivals serve primarily as aspects of the cultural antecedents of a people; they establish identity and foster social cohesion. In Africa, as in other regions, festivals are as artistic as they are cultural. In Delta State, within the South-South Zones of Nigeria, numerous festivals play significant functional roles. Among them, the *Erishi* Festival of the Ase community in Ndokwa East Local Government Area stands out. Although the festival is unknown outside Delta State, it remains a unifying event with profound social functions and theatrical elements. Notably, the *Erishi* Festival functions not merely as ritual or entertainment but as a way of life for the Ase people. This study emphasizes that indigenous African festivals such as *Erishi* have not been sufficiently appreciated, despite their demonstrable capacity for fascination and cultural transformation. Early African scholars such as Soyinka, Senghor, Adelugba, Uyoibukri, Ukala, and Ododo explored the rich performative values of African culture, often in the face of Western critical frameworks that dismissed the bulk of African performance as unarguably fit to be ascribed theatre until they have



been constructively “modernized”. According to Okoye (2010), the nature of this modernity is of course:

the excision of all ritualistic, contingent and presentational forms and elaboration of the mythic, narrative “germs” into a structurally concise, narratively coherent and cognitive experiences (p.3).

Evolutionist scholars used such arguments to suggest that African festivals, though rich in cultural values and dramatic potential, were not yet fully developed theatre. This view aligns with Finnegan’s (1970) assertion that African traditional festivals contain “dramatic and quasi-dramatic phenomena,” though lacking the formalized structures of Western theatre as defined by Aristotle in the *Poetics*. It is worth recalling that Greek and European theatres themselves emerged from ritual celebrations with functional roles, mirroring the fabric of African traditional religious and ritual performances. Nearly all African traditional performances are grounded in religious values, akin to the Great Dionysia of 5th-century B.C. Greece (Banham et al., 1994). This confers African traditional performances, including the *Erishi* Festival, with a universal appeal.

Theoretical Framework

Western theories on drama have been identified as merely footnotes of Aristotle’s theory of drama. This arises from a robust review carried out on the works of foremost theorists like Horace, Gassner, Scaliger, Gustav, Sardou, Castelvetro, Zola, Gotthold, Nietzsche and many others, whose contribution to drama show a resounding amplification of Aristotle’s theory of drama found in the *poetics* (Agha,p.38).

The framework of the study is anchored on Aristotle’s (384-322B.C.) theory of drama and the performance theory of Richard Schechner (1973). It is no exaggeration to say that history of tragic criticism is a series of footnotes of Aristotle in a fragmentary treatise called the *Poetics* (Barnet et al,1998). In that treatise the point raised and subsequently argued by Aristotle has indeed become the foundation of drama, where he highlighted six elements that every drama must possess. He gave the elements as Plot, Character, Thought, Language, Music and Spectacle. According to Aristotle (384-322B.C.) **plot** is the whole structure of the incidents and remains the first in the consideration of the most important of drama, followed by **character** which is a factor that enable us to define the particular quality of the people involved in the doing (incidents). This quality is made manifest in whom they are, what they do and stand for especially at the metaphysical plane, the next is **thought** presented as the ability to say what circumstances allow for and what is appropriate to them. **Language** is words use from the disposition of dialogue and it remains sacrosanct as one of the chief means of communication in drama. **Music** and **spectacle** reinforces beauty in the overall precept of drama. Aristotle in the same vein have also argue for a well-plotted incidents which must not begin or end casually but must follow a pattern which he calls, a beginning, a middle, and an end, later depicted in Gustav Freytag’s dramatic pyramid. With incidents captured as exposition, complication, climax and denourment or resolution. According to Aristotle, a **beginning** is that which does not itself necessary follow anything else, but which leads naturally to another event or incident, while an **end** is the opposite, that which itself naturally either of necessity or most common follow something else, but nothing else comes after it. A **middle** is that which itself follows something else and is followed by another thing (p.738).



Schechner's Performance Theory (1973) broadens the conception of drama to include all events involving performers, audiences, and contexts, he emphasizes that performance is "the whole event, including audience, performers (technicians too, anyone who is there)". His theory also adduces performance to be something planned and designed for presentation (p.20). According to the summation of Schechner (1973), a performance could be ritualized taking the form of secular or sacred rituals or could either tilt to the theatrical, wading into the mimetic form or the use of dialogue. Following the above opinion, he says whether a specific performance is

"ritual" or "theatre" depends mostly on context or function. A performance is called theatre or ritual because of where it is performed, by whom and under what circumstances (p.622).

He, therefore, relates performance to what it is capable of achieving. He says "if the performance is to effect transformation, to heal or to appease or appeal to transcendent others (gods, ancestors, divine royalty, etc) to get result, then the quality listed under the heading " efficacy" will most probably prevail and the performance may be regarded as a ritual. Conversely, if the quality listed under" entertainment" prevails, it may be regarded as theatre (p.622). The consequential nature of the above aspects of Schechner's discussion has necessitated the researcher's classification of *Erishi* as ritual/theatre in its own right following his performance theory. His effused position on the relationship between ritual and performance has affirmed clearly his resolve that ritual is performance, because:

they are acts done; and performances are ritualized: they are codified, repeatable actions. The function of theatre identified by Aristotle and Horace- entertainment, celebration, enhancement of social solidarity, education, (including political education and healing) are also functions of rituals (p.613).

Schechner, have also been able to argue that the thrust of theatre is inseparable from ritual because it is linked with the tradition of the people. Tradition, has been repeatedly defined as "anything that is handed down from the past to the present and then the future" (Etuk, 2002) .Schechner, acknowledged the complexity in defining 'performance' because, he believed that the boundaries separating it on one side of the theatre and on the other from everyday life are arbitrary. Based on that, he categorized performance as a definite dance step and shouts, a known style of singing, an over-all pattern consisting of accepted sequences of events. He further grouped performance as an intentional, emotionally expressive event-centered phenomenon involving pattern and attention in social interaction (p.89).

***Erishi* as Ritual and a Theatre Performance**

This study reveals that *Erishi* embodies performance art through different artistic forms to recreate situations of a live performance often involving a variety of mediums, which incidentally falls within the performative index of Schechner's (1973) classification of what entails performance. This study establishes *Erishi* festival as a ritual performance which is capable of becoming theatre, because it fulfills both functions. First, as a festival with theatrical elements theorized by Aristotle such as: dance, music, spectacle, character, dialogue and plot. Secondly, as a festival that functions as ritual, evolving the sacred forms of ritualized expressions such as the use of: masquerades, incantations, chants, songs, purification, trance and possession as a means of suspending the peoples beliefs in keeping with the spiritual essence of the festival, which is a pact keeping ceremony of the water people and the veneration of the positive forces that have kept their universe aglow. *Erishi*



festival is celebrated when the rains subside, typically between May and June, marking the expectation of harvest. Beyond ritual devotion, the festival also fosters social interaction through gift exchanges, visitations, renewed friendships, and communal feasting, thereby strengthening unity.

Historical Origin of *Erishi* Festival

Erishi festival is an aged long traditional ritual performance of the *Eboh(s)* living in Ase community in Ndokwa East Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. The celebration is entirely a pact keeping ceremony and an annual veneration of their small gods (*Usuei*, *Igerige*, and *Okpotu*), whose image permeate the identity of the people and their cosmology. *Erishi* is the main festival of the Ase people and it is observed annually when the rains have lessened or the periods of high expectation of harvest according to the vegetational prospects of the people.

One belief that still hold sway amongst Ase(s) about the origin of *Erishi* is that it was bequeathed on them by the water people (mermaids), who in their bid to announce their existence to the human society revealed themselves to two fishermen, who were later used as a representation of the human society to establish a pact with the water world. These fishermen were imbued with the gift of an inner eye (transcendental insight) to populate the evidences of their existence through the *Erishi* dance to the human society. In the same vein, Ukala (2010) submits that;

the same stories are told in a community with an infinite number of variations, and both the retailers and consumers may never tire of (it and this) goes side by side with the construction of relatively fresh tales (p. 23).

The festival period does not only signify celebration of *Erishi*, but of life which portray the very quintessence of the people's existence. However, during this period there is a general exchange of gifts, felicitation, renewed friendships, visitations and plenty to eat and drink. To a large extent, these act symbolizes a renewal of bonds of unity, it gives participants the opportunity to reunite with their kith and kin and also rededicate themselves to the spirit of their common heritage. In the words of Amankulor (1985), festivals serve as "a periodic or occasional celebration, merry-making or feast day of special significance in the cultural calendar of the celebrant" (p.83).

Erishi Myth

The myth of *Erishi* ritual performance is an encounter between two forces, one representing the water world and the other the human world. The mythos establish that two fishermen were supposedly captured for spying on the activities of the water clan, an act which is gravely believed to undermine the sanctity of the water world and the serenity of their existence. So, for this reason they were detained and later arraigned before their court for charges of trespass and other related offenses. They were fortunately set free of their conviction when the jury (elders) perceived the humaneness and the ignorance behind their motives. But their plea to be set free was given concern on the condition that they make a pact with the clan, promising to populate the true nature of their existence on their return to the human world, instituting an aspect of their encounter (*Erishi* dance) which will be marked at a certain time and season to document this remarkable feat.

More so, the sacrifices of appeasement performed to usher in *Erishi* festival is also a subject in tandem with the theme of the festival, the devotion is essentially to venerate *Usuei*, *Okpotu* and *Igerige* as positive forces that have constantly protected the people even in turbulent times. These forces do not only represent the true yearning and aspiration of the Ase man and woman, but the true definition of their existence. The *Erishi* myth celebrates confluence of



themes and events that metamorphosed into what is today known as *Erishi* festival, these themes ranges from those of: Hatred, Anger, Frustration, Sauciness, Obsession, Arrogance, Destruction, Mischief, Dissatisfaction, Triumph and Acceptance. These themes are reflected in the mythos and in the various encounters between the water people and the fishermen, until the moment of their triumph and adornment with the ancestral headpiece in the festival performance which symbolizes the acceptance of the duo as member representatives of the water clan.

Social Functions in *Erishi* Festival

The kernel of this discussion also focuses on the social functions of *Erishi* and *Erishi* as a theatre performance, which is objectified in the performative in one sense, and what the festival is capable of achieving within the socio-cultural milieu of the people, especially as it relates to the Ase people and their worldview. According to Doki (2006) and Bakary (1972) on the functional roles of festivals, rituals, and other ceremonial types, affirms that nothing can exist for the sake of its own existence, and as such pointed out that ritual performance have their various roles they play in every society. Doki, contends that

on a more general platform, ritual across the various cultures have certain functions they perform in the life and customs of the people (p.70).

However, Judging from the long standing history of *Erishi* festival as an agent of cultural change, it has been known to achieve the following social functions as recorded by Emiri (2010) and Agha (2023):

1. *Erishi* is essentially a pact keeping rite of the Ase people and the celebration is the only known source for the spiritual cleansing of social evil from the community.
2. The belief surrounding *Erishi* is used to achieve social cohesion and to reestablish the bond of unity among various families.
3. The festival's performance venue *isuwani* which houses the shrine of a most revered deity *igerige* is used to settle grave disputes by swearing to it and at other times can be used to dispense justice by evoking its anger on an unrepentant person.
4. The celebrative power of *Erishi* festival is used to foster renewed bond of unity and social reconnect amongst kith and kin.
5. The *Mmanwu* cult a significant group underpinned with the sacred ritual performances during the festival and the *Erishi* masquerade are used to instill discipline among initiates and non-initiates and among the different age grades in the community.
6. Apart from the spiritual or sacred undertone of the *Erishi* festival it is a form of social entertainment to Ase people.
7. The *Ikpör* a prominent and fierce masquerade in the *Erishi* festival is used as machinery for community task- force especially to redeem debts legitimately owed individuals or the community.
8. The *Erishi* festival is the community's channel for venerating her deities *Usuei*, *Okpotu* and *Igerige* who they believe are their proponents of peace and security.
9. The *Erishi* festival is used to attract tourism
10. The *Mmanwu* cult is used for community policing and to dispense justice in the course of grave injustice. In fact, the *Mmanwu*'s pronouncement is law because of its image presented to the people as the living dead.
11. The *Erishi* festival serves as a social reconstructive mechanism for communal growth and reconstruction.
12. The *Ubi* masquerade with a qualified image of a seer is a relevant agent for spiritual standardization through its prophecies relating to neglected sacrifices which plague the community.
13. The *Owhor* feared for its ruggedity is used to forcefully end the festival by fiercely knocking down anything that is standing around the performance venue with its sharp cutlass. The intention is



to remind the natives that they have long left their trades and farms unattended to, *Owho* awaken the spirit of hard work in the people.

In the above line of thought on beliefs and social functions in *Erishi* festival, Okome (2001) asserts that,

There is strong belief in the existence of a supernatural force which is insuperable and which controls the life of the people. It is also believed that this life can be manipulated to man's advantage by making appropriate sacrifice (p. 40).

Conclusion

Erishi festival is an indigenous cultural heritage of antiquity that houses phenomena of great value that can be used to reconstruct the cultural environment of her people if exploited. For instance, the three deities (*Usuei*, *Okpotu* & *Igerige*) representing the spiritual essence of the people's world view and the definition of their universe, are forces believed to spiritually conjure high rate of fertility, bountiful harvest and exterminate evil forces within their world. Any deviation from sacrificing these small gods may spell doom for the whole community if not managed. *Erishi* masquerade and cult which serves as a relevant agent for curtailing the excesses of communal vices, and to instill high morals and discipline among erring members of the different age grades in the community is fast on its decline. This study affirms therefore, that the powers of the *Mmanwu* and other *Erishi* masquerades can be infringed upon for good, knowing that anything that can decree evil is also capable of good. These powers can be manipulated and channeled towards development to meet the needs and the challenges of recent times, especially in the areas of prosperity, peace and communal defense. But there appear to be a completely lack of scholarly research on the positive powers of these masquerades.

The *Igerige*, veteran of Ase traditional military might as it is known or called, is believed to possess an unsurpassed powers especially those that gave Ase victory at war. It is also a conceivable fact that all the esoteric war-powers of the people comes from it, considering the great conquest and the mysterious feats it pulled during their trying moments (Emiri,p.56). If this is so according to history, it then means that it could be exploited for gains especially through tourism, by erecting a cenotaph of victory in its honour instead of a mere representation with the symbolic *Orise* tree. According to the description of a native Mr. Juju Ekushe cited in Emiri (2010), *Igerige* is "unreservedly six feet nine inches tall, very dark-skinned, with three armlet band on each shoulder-arm, a red band on the forehead, with white chalk strewn across his two blood-shot eyes, in circle right to left, it hangs a gun on each shoulder" (p.157). A statue of such magnitude and magnificent description and surrounded by such an unimaginable myth could attract tourism, just like its counterparts in London, UK called Bryn Gwyn or Bendigeidfran that command great respect in the tourism industry (Emiri,2010).

The *Erishi* festival is believed to attain commendable growth and social reconstruction of its socio-cultural environment through the use of mechanisms like, *Isuani* and *Ndichie* translated to mean "village front" and the "ancestors". *Ndichie* is the god of heredity, although it is not worshipped, it is an eternal covenant (ogide-eka) between two families for the purpose of peace and unity. The bond of peace it commands is much stronger and effective than any written treaty, it is also used to settle intractable dispute by washing down with water and taken as oath calling the ancestors. *Isuani* is the location where the founding ceremony of Ase as a homogeneous entity was carried out, being the first site where the founders of Ase inhabited and also where the articles of ancestral beatification were buried. *Isuani* is indeed a sacred ground used to resolve grave disputes that are life threatening especially by swearing to it, either to prove ones innocence or never to harbour an evil thought of a perceived enemy. This has worked wonders for the people, because those who go contrary to their words after swearing to it often end up mysteriously, and this accounts for one of the key means that has been used to achieve and sustain absolute peace among the people. But most worrisome is that all of these have been abandoned completely with the advent of western orientation and practice.



Finally, following the trail of this study reveals that *Erishi* is one of the shades of African festival, whose performance content embodies certain theatrical elements similar to those peddled by the Western surmise on what constitute theatre.

Recommendation

This study recommends that *Erishi* festival should be subjected to rigorous study, while encouraging scholars of African tradition to look beyond the entertainment aspects of *Erishi* festivals, because it is capped with a lot of cultural values that can bring about socio-cultural transformation of the immediate environments of her people if exploited.

Also it is recommended that both the Local Government Authority and the Delta State Council for Arts and Culture promote the festival through adequate funding and systematic documentation, thereby facilitating further studies. The people of Ase should be encouraged to recognize that the *Erishi* Festival is a heritage which, if properly harnessed, can place them on the world cultural map.

Other relevant cultural agencies of the state should assist in publicizing and promoting the festival as a means of projecting the people's cultural identity and rich heritage.

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