

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN EBIRA EKUECHI FESTIVAL

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Abstract

Celebration of festivals is an important event in every human society, which brings people together from all walks of life. festival mark important social and cultural events in the lives of the people. In Ebiraland masquerade festival Ekuechi is a traditional night masquerade festival that is observed by its adherents among the Ebira. This paper examines the origin of the festival, the community, the various stages that are involved in the festival as well as some major night masquerades that are features and their function. Also the paper considered the costumes and the street performance of the masquerade under the watch of its attendance. Furthermore, the paper examines the significance as well as development regarding the Ekuechi festival in Ebiraland.

Key Words: Masquerade, Change, Continuity, Festival, Ebira

Introduction

The most cherished festival in Ebiraland is the *Ekuechi* festival, which is the present indigenous culture and was also practiced in the past among Ebira, people of Kogi central. Ekuechi is for the remembrance of the death of ancestors or remembering departed relatives (Akande, 2015). The festival symbolizes the end of the Ebira' calendar year (lunar year) and the beginning of a new one. *Ekuechi* is celebrated in December every year which involve the use of night masquerades. These masquerades only come out at night. The word "*Ekuechi Eku* cult meaning (dead people are descending), *Ekuechi* also connotes *Eku*, which means "heaven" and echi means "comes down" (Ohida, 2014), derived from the visitation of the heavenly beings on the town, families, people and localities as well as communities, which portrays the philosophy of the festival. Ododo and Obaji are popularly acclaimed to be the initiators of this masquerade festival. The festival is highly regarded among the people; it upholds the social, culture, belief and tradition of the Ebira's Okene people (Ahmadu, 2004).

Origin of The Ekuechi Festival (The Masquerade Festival)

The actual origin of the *Ekuechi* festival is hard to trace. This has been lost due to the passage of time. There is however one suggested speculation for the origin of the festival. The origin of "Eku" cult (masquerade) festival in Ebiraland originated from Okehi (Uhuodo) and Eika respectively (Ahmadu, 2004), the two of the five sons that make up Ebiraland, Oral tradition had it that Ododo of Okehi and Obaji of Eika were brothers, both of them actually planned together to install "Eku" as a result of their strong belief in life after death and that men were superior to women and to counter women's witchcraft enclosure (Yusuf, 2004).

Having both completed all the "eku" "outfit" as well as all the necessary rituals and charms, certain sacrifices are aired out, which involved blood of various animals as well as consultation of oracles at the hilltop, particularly Upaihi hill, by these two brothers; Obaji and Ododo. When Obaji fell sick and it was obvious that he was going to die, Ododo felt that it was improper for Obaji to be older than him in this world and also allow him to be the elder brother in spirit world (Yusuf, 2004). He told his children that he would commit suicide, which he did through the help of charms so he instructed them to immediately bring up his image in form of a masquerade. In other words, Ododo reincarnated as a spirit and assumed the physical form of a masquerade, while the next day Obaji died naturally and he was also made an "*eku*" second in Ebiraland (Enesi, 2015). Whatever the origin, one thing to note is that, this ancient festival is an integral aspect of the people's culture and history.

Presently, in Ebiraland, Ekuechi festival is an annual celebration of the great work of two brothers, Ododo and Obaji (Akande, 2015). However, these two brothers gave rise to Ekuechi festival. The Ekuechi festival (masquerade festival) celebration is done or staged in turns in sort of waves from the spiritual Centre of Eika and Okehi, which are the senior clans to Adavi, Uga (Okengwe) and Ihima, these are the five (5) sons of Ebiraland which also made the five (5) district in Ebiraland (Yusuf, 2004). Eika was accompanied by outing of ochi'eku, which means the ancestral staff (okute) of authority of Obaji which was taken round in Obangede town and some other parts of Eikaland then late to Okehi which are the origin of Ekuechi Festival, during the festival, masquerades could perform anywhere in Ebiraland, the ekuechi occasion in every other

area was confined to the area concerned and even between Okengwe and Ihima which held theirs at the same time the masquerades would not cross boundaries of their choice. The order of performance was set by the ancestors called (Ohikwu) (Ahmadu, 2004), throughout Ebiraland homage was always paid by the masquerade to Ododo and Obaji, and nobody served his 'father' with viands on annual ekuechi night until the eku-ahete as messenger of Ododo and Obaji (Eika-Okehi Temple), (Adinoyi-Ojo,1996).

Whatever, be the issue, Ododo is regarded by the Ebiras as the creator of "Eku" cult in Ebiraland while Obaji is regarded as the second. These two brothers are regarded as heroes, as well as prophets, and they occupy the highest position among the Epira heroes because without the Ekuechi festival, the Epira people would have been without a pervading culture, since most of the present traditions are centered on "eku" cult.

The Ekuechi festival is very significant in understanding the people's culture, norms, beliefs and tradition, both in the past and present. Their significance lies in the fact that they illustrate among other things, historical events, coming of age, harvesting of crops and appeasement to various gods for protection against enemies, evil or epidemic diseases. Another significance of the festival is used to purify the votaries. They pay homage to chief priest and renew their loyalty to the divinity and the various cults. They also use the annual festival to make offerings to the ancestors who had been in a way still in communication and communion with the living. This is because there is no separate annual festival for the ancestors where they have been deified. Epira people believe that eku has the power to cleanse the community of evil forces and impurities. Epira either at school or state sponsored cultural extravaganza is showcased through eku performances. At other times eku outing may be to commemorate historic events in Ebiraland. It is also performed as part of the ritual to bring an end to natural disasters like drought, locust invasion, floods, and fire, among others (Adinoyi-Ojo, 1996). It is important to note here that, the festival is all male affairs, the reason why women don't take part in the night masquerade is because the night masquerading and its secret are prerogatives of the men. Women have been excluded from sharing in the secrets for they are weak and fickle and are therefore not fit to take part in them. They are mysterious and sometimes unclean. They cannot therefore approach these ancestral manifestations (Umar, 2016), whose character is diametrically opposed to their own. The festival in the past was celebrated in four (4) stages, but this has changed and these stages have been lumped into other stages.

STAGE I

Before the eve, since the festival is in December, either early or late December, a lot of preparations need to be done. Various chief priests from different clans in Ebiraland normally sit and discuss how to fix actual day, where various animals blood are needed for sacrifice as well as a lot of consultations of oracle at Upai hill, since, Kogi central is surrounded with hills (Akande, 2015). All these are done in order to avoid witchcraft from interfering in the festival in Ebiraland.

STAGE II

The stage is the eve of the festival, it starts with the eve (*unehe*), it can also be called carnival live vigil, eve of Ekuechi is designed to accommodate and satisfy the cultural thirst of the women folk, in which women folk singers called (Omikede) are allowed to entertain people with various kind of songs in traditional ways of the Epira's (Opotu, 2014).

Note that, (Omikede) are found in different localities and communities in Ebiraland (Ohiare, 1989), eve (*unehe*), is actual very interesting, there are a lot of merriment, people get to dress in beautiful wears for the celebration because *unehe* accommodates everyone, men, women, old and young, during which songs and drumming rent the air through the night to herald the festival. The following day, in the morning, families exchange food and drinks gifts especially in appreciation for the wives married from the in-laws, and in thanksgiving to God for a bumper harvest, the young Epira seem to be more interested in the social aspect of the festival, because of the important place on this festival, they migrate home from all corners of the world to take part in the celebrations, people that have not seen each other for a very long time, get to see one another as a result of this festival, people can make new friends. Most people, after the festival, still keep their friendships which in some cases metamorphose into marriages.

STAGE III

After the eve, comes the afternoon of the "Great Night", here, men and some privileged women ("onoku") are part of these. "Great Night" is normally marked by the slaughtering of he-goats, rams, hens, etc. the blood of he-goats and rams as well as hens is spread on the irepa (where sacrifice are carried out). Women and small children are usually given their own share in the sacrificial meat and the rest of the meat kept by the elders for the masquerades "eku", it involves a lot of merriment, and women also prepare some delicious food for the masquerades "eku". During this period various household, in Ebiraland, are expected to warmly welcome any one who visits their house, at the same time there should be availability of food and drinks, for everybody irrespective of whether one is a stranger or family member. This is so because it is not known

who is an angel in disguise on this auspicious festival of descent of the heavenly spirits. Every one therefore is treated with decency love and warmth that connote the festival.

STAGE IV

At about 6.30 to 8.00 p.m. on the “*Great Night*” depending on the locality or community since every community have their own night masquerade, out of the five (5) sons of Ebira with different names, the festival starts with the beating of a particular local drum by the harbinger of the festival, which is called (“*agidibo*”), the beating of the “*agidibo*” signals the beginning of the festival. As soon as the sound of “*agidibo*” with a shrill, frightening clanging of gongs which sends chilling vibes on everybody and sends them scampering to their various houses, locality or community, all the women (except the privileged ones) will lock themselves behind closed door, while men would hurriedly run into their houses to prepare for the festival. At this point, there is always a dead silence within the locality until the appearance of the “*eku-ahete*” masquerades. Less than forty minutes after the sounds of the first “*agidibo*” penetrate into the locality, the “*eku-ahete*” masquerade which normally wears an assortment of different sized bells (called “*ireha*”) is the first to respond to the call of “*agidibo*” and to break the silence. The “*eku-ahete*” comes out and runs through the streets of the locality yelling, “*ododo.....ododo.....I am sent by ododo* (Akande, 2015). The “*eku-ahete*” is known for cleaning and cleansing the way for other masquerade to perform. There are five popular or major masquerades in the cult. These are; Eku’rahu, Eku’okise, Eku’akatapa, Eku’oba and Eku’ahete. Eku’rahu performs throughout the night of Ekuechi festivals. It can also be invited at night, at the funeral ceremonies when an elderly man dies in the community, to entertain people with songs, as a way of escorting the deceased to the land of ancestors, which is a mark of respect to the family of the deceased. Eku’okise proclaims heavenly messages from God and prophesy to people with clairvoyance, during Ekuechi festival. The Eku’akatapa is the most popular among all the night masquerades that is recognize by every Ebira, generally it gives, message to people (including women). The *Ekuechi* is known for cleaning the way for other masquerades to perform as well as free and safe passage in the ancestral visits to earth during Ekuechi festival, apart from these five major masquerades there are other mini masquerades in various communities in Ebiraland, all within the five sons that make up Ebiraland (Ahmadu, 2004).

The “*eku-ahete*” masquerade enters into every house or compound two times, from one community or locality to another. In their first times, no person (including the elders) could look at him. Everybody must bend down, cover his face with hands, In the past, anyone seen by an “*eku-ahete*” in this first outing, was immediately machete to death, but today, however, the “*eku-ahete*” will only flog the offender. During the second outing of the “*eku-ahete*” everybody is then allowed to look at him and the head of each household may give him gifts (including the sacrificed meat). The “*eku-ahete*” may give the landlord some advice on how to go about the next year (which has just begun) in order to make it prosperous and to have a bumper harvest (Yusuf, 2004).

The next type of masquerades after the “*eku-ahete*” to come out is “*eku-akatapa*”. The “*eku-akatapa*” is the most popular among all the night masquerades that is recognize by every Ebira, generally it gives “message” to people (including women). The rams, he-goats as well as hens and also the prepared food are consumed by the “*eku-akatapa*”. At this juncture, it is important to note that if there is any eventuality which necessitates the termination of the festival after the “*eku-ahete*” has come out, the “*Ekuechi*” is legally and traditionally celebrated (Ahmadu,2004). However, after the Eku’akatapa and Eku’ahete, all other masquerades can now perform and entertain people.

Because of the importance of “*eku-ahete*” outing, vigorous preparations are usually made by the “*eku-ahete*” in order to withstand some interference from any quarters especially the witchcraft, the *eku-ahete*” is very crucial in the success of the Ekuechi festival (Ohida, 2014). Nevertheless, the dead silence after the penetration of the sounds of the first “*agidibo*” into the locality is part and parcel of the festival and only the “*eku-ahete*” is scheduled to break the silence. After the silence has been roken by “*eku-ahete*”. Throughout the entire night various masquerades in different locality or community or even within the street, sing all kinds of songs glorifying God, addressing societal issues, fore-warning on pending challenges, admonishing on ethics, as well as human general behavior among others. At this point, people are seen with their tape recorder tying to record different masquerade songs of their choice in various locality or community.

The following morning, when it is time for people to leave for their various homes, after the previous night events, that lasted till daybreak (early in morning), at this point there was no formal announcement of winner among the masquerade nor was there any trophies given to any of the masquerades, but, people were seen with sense of fulfillment, that the year has been rounded off in peace and a prayer for a similar event in the following year. The Ekuechi festival may continue for the next nine (9) days, every night till

daybreak, in some districts this extension is strictly speaking not an integral part of the festival and hence it can be waived and is being waived in some districts.

Generally, the entire masquerades are considered spirit of the ancestors who came to visit the living in masked form. The ideology of most ebira masking is rooted in the closeness and interpretation of the worlds of the dead and living, the beauty and idea of masking brings about the manifestations and metaphors of powers of the dead and living in sights, sounds, and sometimes the odours. Beautiful costumes and features showcase the power of beauty, whereas animals skins, leaves and many other adapted natural ingredients put together brings about the presence of heavy threatening masks and powerful spirits with important authoritative social and political roles.

Once the masquerades are out on the street they become more powerful and they are known for threatening lookers with long cane that they carry and searching the area vigorously and deliberately with movement of their head and eyes front and back for possible enemies, sometime, some men offer themselves to be flogged to test and exhibit their manly valour some of the masquerades are accompanied with songs and beating of drums, (Akande, 2015) amass followers as it moves from one point to another shaking its body vigorously stamping and rushing at spectators until it is restrained by its attendants. Some of them possess very powerful and potent charms, and are carved in large size, bold, outsized features and in a grotesque form which makes it look fearful. It is being reinforced by its looks, songs such as, the masquerade is out to seek for peace with everyone. In the past, older masquerades were feared and respected not only by the ordinary beings but also fellow but lesser masquerade (Yusuf, 2004). The lesser masquerade on approaching an older one would drop his cane and bow his head as he gave the older masquerade the peculiar masquerade greeting or salutation three times (Okene, 1995). While still remaining in that greeting position, the older masquerade would either gently lay his hand or the cane on the back of the lesser masquerade to indicate that his greeting is accepted in good faith. There were some rules guiding for instance it was a taboo in the past for masquerade to flog strangers, who are not Ebira or flog an elder of the community.

Should a masquerade chase a person and the person runs into a compound or seeks refuge by hiding behind an elder sitting in front of his house, the masquerade must turn back and give up the idea of whipping the person. Also if a person or group of people found themselves face to face with the masquerade they would quickly kneel down or prostrate on the ground as a mark of respect for the masquerade (Okene, 1995). The masquerade was never expected to flog them again but at today you see masquerade flogging strangers (non ebira's) and they also chase group or person that hiding behind an elder's house and flog them, today politician now use the masquerade to their advantage, they instruct the masquerade to flog their political opponent for them.

Their outing from one part of the community to another and their interactions involve mostly their unmasked follower or escorts and the audience with little or no dialogue. Dance and music, rather than speech carry the activity forward and provide it peak of dramatic intensity songs are usually less, but true narratives of what will happened.

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Change and Continuity

Like most ancient African cultures, the coming of Islam and Christianity into the land had impacted remarkably on the celebration of the festival. The festival has become fused into Islam and Christianity. As such consultation of oracle, to fix the actual day in December day, has been discarded along with its accompanying fetish practices such as anyone who sees eku-ahete for the first time of entering a compound or house is machete to death (Cheche, 2015). This aspect of the festival which can be said to be the fabric of the festival has been destroyed. Thus instead of the promoting its original identity it was known for in the past, it now encourages people to see the eku-ahete masquerade on the face for the first time of entering the compound or house, since the offender, no that he will only be flogged some strokes of cane, therefore this tradition has been misunderstood by present generation (Cheche, 2015).

The aspect whereby the masquerades don't flog non ebira (strangers) groups or individuals who hide behind an elder's back are no longer observed. Today, masquerades flog strangers as well as individuals hiding behind back of an elder. Also, person or group of people who never knew a masquerade was approaching but suddenly found themselves face to face with the masquerade, even after kneeling or prostrating to masquerade, the masquerade still goes ahead and flog the individual or group of people, which is not part of the ekuechi festival in the past. (Ohiku, 2015).

Change in cultural value of Ebira ekuechi festival, in the time past, Ekuechi serves as a forum for inter family re-union and reconciliation, whenever there was misunderstanding amongst family members or

community. It is during ekuechi festival that such disputes resolved amongst family and community but today, that is no longer obtainable due to what is called modernization and 'coming of age' in Ebiraland.

Ekuechi festival has drastically changed. In the past, people from neighboring villages and town migrated to Okene town, for instance people from Akoko-Edo in Edo state, Ogori/ Magongo and Okun people both in Kogi State as well as people from other area, all migrated to watch the display of various masquerades, all these, no longer happen as a result of violence associated with Ekuechi festival (Ohize, 2015). Today the politician use the masquerade to chase their political opponents. The masquerades institution has become an instrument of violence as masquerade culture and tradition is divided along party lines. The traditional belief among the people in powers of masquerades as representations of the ancestors on earth was demystified. The masquerades and singer who hitherto entertained during cultural festivals were now aligned with the different political parties thus turning such festival into an arena of conflict and violence, which was not so in the past (Ododo 2001 and Sani 1997).

In addition, there was an increase in the sense of attachment in clan which invariably led to dividing prominent masquerades along clan lines, which was not in the past. For instance; the Achewuru masquerades have the support of Omoye clan while Okeverse masquerades have the support of Oziogus clan (Enesi, 2015). All these were not part of the festival in the past

Conclusion

The Ekuechi festival in Ebiraland is an integral part of the people culture. Ekuechi festival as found in most other African festivals, in fact, it is the pivots around which other activities in the festival revolve. Songs rendered during this festival are always very rich in entertainment, instructional and philosophical values. These songs touch numerous subject matters but they mainly explore social and political themes. It started with them right from the time of the word Ebira as a tribe, Ekuechi festival is important to Ebira people, its existence is as old as the tribe. The "eku" cult forms the backbone of Ebira culture. In fact, remove the "eku" cult, the Ebira tribe becomes a cultureless society, however, Ododo and Obaji were popularly acclaimed to be the initiators of the masquerade festival in Ebiraland, the festival is highly regarded among the people this is because it upholds the social, culture, belief and tradition of the Ebira people.

In modern times, Westernization has largely influenced the Ekuechi. This is seen in the changing traditions which hitherto were not there. Some of these changes have already been highlighted and discussed in the paper.

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APPENDIX: LIST OF USEFUL INFORMANTS

S/N	Names	Age	Types of information	Occupation	Year of interview
1	Mallam Sadiq Akande	97	Nature of festival	Trader	2015
2	Adamu Cheche	95	Nature of festival	Chief Priest	2014
3	Mallam Ahmadu Opotu	45	Nature of festival	Civil servant	2014
4	Mallam Obansa Umar	79	Nature of festival	Farmer	2016
5	Saidu Ohida	49	Nature of festival	Civil servant	2015
6	Salisu Ohiku	75	Nature of festival	Clan Chief	2015
7	Jimoh Enesi	60	Nature festival	Farmer	2015
8	Jatau Ohize	73	Nature festival	Trader	2015