

## Evaluating Performance Aesthetics in Amassoma *Seigben* Festival of Bayelsa State

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### ABSTRACT

Despite Africa's immense contributions to the body of world literature in written form, much of its cultural riches remain in oral forms, hence have remained undocumented for the critical evaluation of the aesthetics. Amassoma *Seigben*, is one of such performative genre enriched with theatrical aesthetics yet receiving little scholarly attention.

The paper examines in Amassoma *Seigben* such elements as theme, characters, chants, costumes, masquerades and audience participation as performance aesthetics in this festival with a viewing to establishing the theatrical worth of the festival. The Performance and archetypal theories were adopted in its analysis. The festival reveals the presence of such dramatic elements as theme, character, chants, costumes, masquerades and audience participation as performance aesthetics in the festival. These elements therefore subsumes it under the dramatic genre in oral form.

**KEY WORDS:** *Seigben*, performance, Aesthetics, festival and evaluation.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Despite Africa's immense contributions to the body of world literature in written form, much of its cultural riches remain in oral forms. This is largely because Africa's reliance largely on the verbal communication. Consequently, so much of the continent's riches, vis-à-vis the aesthetic values that mark its cultural distinctiveness, have escaped sufficient documentation and critical lenses. Some of such riches bound in cultural events such as seasonal fiestas. Amassoma, a riverine community in Bayelsa State in the Niger Delta periodically showcases one of such festivals – *Seigben*, a performative event imbued with a lot of literary aesthetics that subsumes it in the genre of drama in orature. The concern of this essay therefore is the defining aesthetics in this cultural performance.

#### The Concept of Aesthetics

Aesthetics is as a branch of philosophy that is concerned with the understanding of beauty and how it manifests itself in art and nature. In modern society, it is referred to as a branch of behavioural science that deals with the investigation of the phenomena of the arts and their relationship with the human behaviour. Aesthetics explores the nature of art, beauty, and taste, with the creation and appreciation of beauty. "It is the task of creating beauty out of the ugly details of life" in the words of Emmanuel Akpan and Udo Etuk (qtd. in Friday Okon 1993, p.156). It is an expression of the writer's thoughts, emotions, intuitions, and desires. In other words, "the technical beauty of a work of art cannot be detached from the theme the writer intends to send across to his targeted audience" (Okon, 1993, p.156 Emphasis mine). It is even more personal than that: it is about sharing the way we experience or feel the world, which for many is an extension of personality. It is the communication of intimate ideas that cannot be fully expressed by words alone. And because words alone are not enough, we must find some other vehicle to carry our intent. Aesthetics, in a nutshell, is how the content is expressed. They enable the dramatist communicate the content (theme or message) to the audience. These elements can be referred to as dramatic elements or elements of performance.

The detection of performance elements or aesthetic in cultural festivals have engendered research even in Nigeria, albeit that of Amassoma *Seigben*, despite its long time existence has sparing research evidence. Some related literature available shall be examined here below.

### **Scholarly Review**

Eyo it is a famous festival in Nigeria and due to its popularity, people from far and near come to take part in the celebration. Being a cultural festival, many rituals are carried out before and after it. Available works on the festival reveal that these rituals are carried out dramatically. In recent times, the government of Lagos State has enhanced its celebration financially. However, the dramatic or mythological and archetypal elements that have been the sole reason for its survival have not been examined.

More so, *Argungu* is a similar festival that showcases some dramatic elements. There is the use of song, ritual, costumes and incantations. According to Benjamin Asogwa, Joseph Umeh and Victoria Okwoche (2012, p.195), the participants usually dress colourfully with singing accompanied by drumming is done by those on shore to boost the spirit of the fishermen and women. Before a rush is made into the river, the god of the river has to be appeased to forestall any form of accident during the fishing. Other activities take place after the long day's catch include, dancing and masquerading among others. The study on the festival merely examines the origin and significance of the festival but never make mention of the dramatic or archetypal elements that are found in it. The same can be said about Shyllon's (2007, p.392) narrative. He examined the presence of dramatic aesthetics in his study and discuss their social significance. More so, Nwi-Akeeri, Mbube's (2017,). However, their papers have not examined other key dramatic elements like theme, costume, character among others that are evidenced in the festival, not to talk of the archetypal significance of the rituals.

More so, Andrew Horn's (1981, p.112) paper on the Kalabari festival observes that the festival is pregnant with many dramatic and archetypal elements but these elements have not been fully studied. The paper does not acknowledge the roles of these dramatic elements to the festival. He does not also fully examine the dramatic aspects of these mediums. Robin Horton's paper "The gods as Guests: An Aspect of Kalabari Religious Life" (1981, p.81) does a similar work but does not also examine the dramatic elements that are embedded in the Kalabari ritual festival of inviting the gods as guests to dwell among the living.

The presentation of (*Ungozu* festival by Mangiri Golikumo and Kquofi Steve, 2014, p.274) in their paper is not different. They reveal that it is a festival that opens room for exciting masquerade performers who dance to the rhythm of drums. According to them, after the *bebepri* ceremony where the initiates led by the priest go round the town paying homage to great initiates and revered ancestors, spirits and gods, Mark the commencement of the festival.

The paper also reveals that the sacrifice of a dog is made to appease the water spirits and to beckon on them to bless the people. The festival is rich with dramatic and archetypal content but these elements have not been fully studied by scholars.

Baro Ologu's (2011, p.23) research work on the *Seigben* fishing and feasting festival seems to stand out among the few available sources on the *Seigben* festival. Baro's work examines the historical origin and background of Amassoma, the origin of *Seigben* festival and the traditional belief system of the people. His book also covers aspects of the different rituals that are carried out before and at the close of the festival. Other issues treated in the work are the significance of the festival and the way the festival is celebrated. The weakness of Baro's work is that he only did a historical survey on the importance of the *Seigben* festival, but did not examine the dramatic and archetypal elements that are embedded in the festival. This therefore leaves a gap that this paper seeks to fill. Victor Turner's strand of Performance theory is deployed for analysis.

### **Performance Critical Theory**

Performance theory was propounded by Richard Schechner and Victor Turner (1985, p.5). However, Victor Turner does not see traditional activities as some ordered set of actions across but as culturally distinctive; which means that two cultures may not exhibit same features. Turner prefers them as liminal activities. In his work, *The Ritual Process* (1969), Turner sees liminal activities as "anti-structure" as opposed to the "structure" of normal cultural operations (Marvin Carlson, 1996, p.23).

He observes that actual cultural activities are considered *liminoid*, absent of contrary to liminal activities (1985, p.22). According to him, such situations, are liminal, because it provide a space removed from daily activity for members of a culture "to think about how they think in propositions that are not in cultural codes but about them" (Marvin Carlson, 1996, p.22 ;). While *liminoid* are daily performances occur nature, they are elastic; liminal are not.

Turner argues further that every one of us puts up a form of performance in every human society. This could be via the clothes we wear; the conversations we have or the food taken. They are all forms of performances designed distinguish ourselves from others within in a community. This approach has chosen because it is best suitable for the study.

### **The Origin of Amassoma Seigben Festival**

The Amassoma *Seigben* (Throw Away Evil) festival is a multipurpose festival. According to an online paper entitled “The history of Amassoma *Seigben*, Fishing and Feasting Festival” by a blogger who identifies himself as Timi (Anonymous, 2018, p.5), the festival originated from the plan of burial rites befitting the dead of King Oboro, the founder of Amassoma kingdom. Oral tradition on the festival records that challenged by finance to bury their king, the people of Ogboin clan of which Amassoma is a constituent, resorted to general contributions. The period coincided with their harvest season, so the women were asked to donate yam, while the men brought palm oil. The people were now challenged on what to cook the food with to entertain sympathizers that would come from different locations to mourn their late king. They decided to go for a fishing expedition at “*Oubulou*” (a long narrow lake) located at the southeast end of Amassoma. They had a successful catch and the situation culminated in a colourful feasting ceremony. (Anonymous, 2018, p.5)

The following year a second fishing expedition was carried out in honour of the late king and the people also had productive results from it. From this development, the people now believed that it was the spirit of *Oboro /Oyein* (Our Mother) that was behind their success (Anonymous, 2018). Hence, the practice of fishing and feasting was established. The period also coincided with their period of purification. So, from that time, 28<sup>th</sup> of May every year was fixed for the festival (Anonymous, 2018, p.5). The said lake is usually locked after the festival with mats and people are barred from fishing there. It is usually kept sacred till another festival, as defaulters face the anger of the gods. The festival is a tripartite festival: fishing, feasting and finally purification of the land against evil spirits and casting away of other evil deposits.

### **Performance Aesthetics in Amassoma Seigben Festival**

The fiesta entails drumming, singing and dancing with the performers costumed in special attires – all of which and such element as theme associated it the fiesta place the stamp of oral drama on it. The various constative elements shall be examined in turn.

#### **Theme**

Like other festivals in Nigeria, Amassoma *Seigben* is celebrated each year with a general theme bordering on the common existence of the sixteen different compounds constituting the community. The existence of theme in the performance centred festival validates its theatrical worth. The theme in the past was usually given by a man called Mr Block Esure. But today it is named by others after his death. The following are some themes that have featured from 2000 to date:

*Ozozona* (Let us unite)

*Enewarikediana* (Mind your own business)

*Ondo- Akolo* (Staff of long life)

*Ozozotari* (Let us love one another)

*Ebiariladei* (It is time to see good)

*Ebisuobodei* (Good things have come)

*Okeniwonimo* (Let us walk together)

*Miebokewonimo* (Go after those that have hurt you)

All these themes are informed by situations in the village. Celebrated in different depicts a significant event that has happened in the town that year, whether for good or for bad.

#### **Character**

Characters feature in *Seigben* festival like other festivals. The characters in *Seigben* are composed of the performers. The dancers who participate in *Igbelebele* dance, *OkesonomoSei*, *Adika sei*, *Toutwa sei* among many others. The fisher men and women, the drummers, masqueraders also make up the cast list. Other characters are the priest and of course the active audience, who comment, argue, laugh, jeer, boo and gesticulate during the performances. The Audience play major roles in *Seigben*, they dance to the overall satisfaction and pleasure of all, sing and perform to entertain everybody. In fact, their active performance in the final ritual contributes to the sanity in the land of Amassoma through the series of rituals carried out; especially the *Sei dugo* ritual which aims to cleanse the land finally. Therefore, it can also be said that like *Izara* festival, *Seigben* festival cannot hold or take place without characters.

#### **Costumes**

*Amassoma Seigben* festival is celebrated in different costumes. Usually, on the eve of the festival, the young boys will at the early hours of the evening walk around the whole village in sparkling white gowns (*pina alor*). The sanctified nature of the festival which should be revered by all and holding a candle stick in his right hand. It is part of the opening rituals that herald the festival. People are not expected to come out during this procession, especially women.

*Ila*, is a common name for all kinds of beads, it is a significant part of the costume during *Seigben* festival performances. These beads (*Ila*) which are worn by the dancers, drummers and chiefs. There are different kinds of *Ila*, the *bara Ila*, *ofo Ila*, *buo Ila* and *tebe Ila*. There is also what is called *illa Ila butuwai*, a cloth woven with beads.



Figure 1.1: *illa ila butuwai*



Figure 1.2: *buwo ila*



Figure 1.3: *ofo ila*

These different kinds of the *Ila* are worn to signify class and wealth in *Seigben* festival as well as the entire Izon kingdom. The performers wear them to portray the rich and classic nature of the festival.



Figure 1.4: *bara ila*



Figure 1.5: *ofo ila*



Figure 1.6: *illa ila tuon*

Rattlers are also tied around the waists of both male and female performers.



Figure 1.7: *Seigben* male performer



Figure 1.8: *Seigben* female performer

This is to add aesthetic to the wriggling of their waists. They tie local wrappers locally called *bede*. It also comes in various patterns and designs.



Figure 1.9: Seigben performer in their *agbopu tu bebe*



Figure 1.10: Seigben performer in her costume



Figure: 1.11 Seigben performer in his costume

We also have the *kunu tu bede* (waist wrapper), this is tied around the waist. This again, also comes in different designs and patterns.



Figure 1.12: Seigben performers in their costumes

There is the one tied around the chest (*agbopu*) to have a unique pattern. Some are simply sewn clothes that are worn. These sewn clothes are generally called *butowai* which comes in different shapes, sizes and designs.

### Masquerading

Another substantial element in *Seigben* is masquerading. The masquerades assumes another personality-spirit of beings and ancestors. Masquerading is a widespread practice in Africa and serves as expressions of the ideology and communal essence of ethnic groups who indulge in masking or masquerading to achieve different purposes. Masking is, therefore, a firm mode of artistic expression in Africa. In Igbo culture, as applicable to the IZONS, the masquerade embodies the spirit and human worlds. The mystique surrounding the masquerade is one of the key components of the Igbo culture that survived Western influences. It is generally believed in IZON land that the masquerade is a spirit which springs from the earth or ground. The masquerades are classified into categories based on specialization. Each masquerade possesses particular attributes: warrior-like prowess, mystical powers, youthfulness, and/old age. Each masquerade specializes in one or more skills: dancing skills, acrobatics, and other ritual manifestations.

A peculiar aspect of masquerading in Africa and particularly in Nigeria is that it is exclusive of the womenfolk. Hardly does one see or hear that women are involved in masquerading. There are, however, isolated cases of female dance groups that wear masks during their dances. Among them are the *Agud* and *Moni-nkim* dance groups among the Ekajuk and Ejagham communities of Northern Cross River State and *abang* dance groups among the Efiks of Calabar, in the Southern Senatorial District of Cross River State all in Nigeria (Francis Ganyi, Idom Inyabri, and James Okpiliya, 2013, p.55).

Amassoma *Seigben* festival is the most attended festival in Bayelsa State, hence, it brings to the fore different kinds of masquerade performances. These various masquerade displays add to the Ambience of the...festival. Interest in these masquerades aroused by the existing myths that the masquerade performs under some spiritual influences and as such, are replicas of spirits. This is further stressed by Sunday Ododo as he writes: "The belief that ancestral masquerades are spirits and not human confers influence on such masquerades and raises the people's imagination to the point of ecstasy. Thus like 'Father Christmas,' the spirits, cloaked in ancestral masquerades, usher a load of gifts, albeit spiritual, on the people." (2001, p.31).

Bees Reed corroborates these maskers are spiritually empowered, which accounts for their excessive display of energy during the performances:

Most masquerades are activated and protected by supernaturally charged "medicines," substances made from sacred materials that are placed on the masks or the bodies of the maskers. The medicines are the province of the men who are responsible for the presentation and care of the masquerade, the maskers, and spirits involved (Reed, 2005, p.50).

Through the agency of the masker who wears the costume, the invisible spirit is made physically tangible. Masquerades may accord honour to virtuous ancestors and shower blessings on the community.



**Figure 1.13: Ofurumo masquerade followed behind by the Angala pele masquerade performing at Seigben festival**

Reed's revelation is validated in the Amassoma Seigben as the spirits sometimes lead Reed's revelation is validated in the Amassoma Seigben as to dive into the river during a performance.

### **3.3.5 Audience participation**

Audience participation is also an element that plays out in every African Amassoma, *Seigben* is not an exception. The audience participate in the performance through gesticulations, clapping, nodding, and booing among others, showing that they are totally immersed in a performance. For instance, interacting with an "audience friend", a character is often designed to be comic and sympathetic or otherwise. Typical interactions involve call and response. An example such interactions is: Character: "Han!" Audience: "Hin!" The participation of the audience also includes booing and hissing at the villain or performers, back and front arguments which are usually composed of simple, repetitive phrases amongst many other ways audience participate. An example of this is: Character: "Ye gbin ba?" Audience: "ba kumo o!" These chain of activities take place at Amassoma *Seigben* festival as demonstrated above

Audience participation manifests on different occasions. In *Seigben* it plays out during the masquerading exercise, dancing, wrestling, and singing, fishing at the lake, the procession and more. The audience partakes in all these different activities during *Seigben*. This is made so easy because the stage is a typical traditional African stage where both the performers and the audience are at the same level; hence, it gives room for the performers to interact with the audience easily. More often, the audience is held captive due to the level of performance. The audience will find it difficult leaving the arena before the end of the performance since the performers put in their best and perform to general satisfaction.



Figure 1.14: A cross section of audience participating in Seigben festival

Also, the reverse becomes the case when the expectations of the audience are disappointed. When this happens, the audience freely walk out of the arena at will, leaving the arena with a scanty audience.

### Chants

The word chant is derived from a Latin term “cantare,” which means to sing. It is synonymously used with such words as song and music. A chant is a short, simple melody, especially one characterized by single notes to which indefinite numbers of syllables are intoned. Hence, in this work, both words will be used interchangeably to convey the same meaning.

Robin Horton captures the significance of chants in African festivals as it is manifested in the Kalabari ritual of bringing the gods as guests into the village thus:

As the time of the rituals draws near, a chorus of singers (generally women) chants the praises of the gods in songs which allude constantly to their characters and achievements. Then, after the invocations and offerings there follows the most notable part of Kalabari religious practice (1981, p.90).

Chants are powerful tools in African festivals. They perform many functions which include, praising the gods, ancestors and highly placed personalities in society. More so, the act of praising the gods prepares and bring them up to functions in traditional gatherings.

According to Gabriel Godini Darah, there are different kinds of chants for different occasion. Each chant intoned conveys a central message or theme as captured in the Udje song poetry of the Urhobo people of Delta State (1981, p.504). The themes are also diverse depending on the song or chants taken out by the singers. However, some treat similar themes as evidenced in the Udje song poetry where each song seeks to ridicule a weakness in opponents' camp.

Amassoma *Seigben* festival makes judicious use of chants or songs which puts the general atmosphere in either sober or philosophizing mood whenever songs or chants are rendered. The singers are usually mixed, comprising males and females. These songs are usually composed by lead singers and other members of the *Igbelegbele* group of dancers. However, some could be borrowed from other vocalists in the town. As has been said earlier, each song seeks to convey a message. They are very short songs reiterated to heighten their meanings. They are divided into two parts. Each of these songs is rendered differently and different drum beats accompanying the songs. We have the *Kpangbi* chants which are voiced like the English bass notation. *Kpangbi* means, heavy or loud; depicting the deep note rendition of the chant.

The *kiringa* chants are opposite of *Kpangbi* chants. *Kiringa* means light and weightless, hence they are rendered on light notes with the drums beating faster than the *Kpangbi* songs. But both songs send philosophical messages to the audience and also serve as tools of social criticism. They criticise deviant behaviours in the society like stealing, killing, witchcraft, adultery, and prostitution, among others. In the same vein, good behaviours are also exulted in these chants. The singers are usually mixed, comprising males and females. Below are some *Kpangbi* and *Kiringa* chants:

#### Izon Version (1)

Ibo ni iweri yo ko bo yemi  
I ma bari iweri yo bo do  
ma bari iweri yo kobo yemi I ne ebi okpomo

#### English Translation (1)

You have come to insult me again  
You have come to insult me again  
You have come to insult me again  
With your blessed life

**Izon Version (2)**

Lelemo lelemo Lelemo  
Lelemo lelemo lelemo  
Iyei lelemo  
Bolou erema bo tubuwo olo  
Aray Lani arau yei lelemo gha bineini  
Bolou erema bo tu bowo do

**English Translation (2)**

Pet Pet Pet  
Pet Pet Pet  
Pet your husband  
The first lady has become the last  
Because she could not pet her husband  
The last lady has become the first lady

**Native Version (3)**

Okoba mo abo  
okoba mo abo  
Saa nana arau saa bido  
okoba ma fa

**English Translation (3)**

Bring the money  
Bring the money  
The woman creditor has come for her money  
But there is no money to pay again

**Izon Version (4)**

kiri okpo fini wo piri (3x)  
Izon kiri okpo fini wo piri  
kiri okpo bi paki koro nimi bimeini

**English Translation (4)**

Open the land for us (3x)  
Open the Izon land for us  
Open the Izon land for us  
Because it is just lying down helpless

Each of the above songs has a central message. For instance, the first chant entitled “Ebabodei” centres around the theme of insult and poverty. It brings to bear practical situations in life when the rich and privileged in society tend to mock and look down on the poor. The persona in the song asks if the rich man/woman has come in his/her usual manner to pour insults on him/her.

It is a philosophical chant that teaches the rich whose kernels have been cracked for them by providence to be humble rather use their wealth against the poor. It is a song that usually calls for sober reflection each time it is rendered. Most times, it provokes weeping from the singers as well as the audience. This goes to show how powerful and emotional some of these songs could be.

The second song entitled “Komo” advocates the theme of care and meekness. It dwells on the issue of polygamy as a feature of Izon culture. The Izon men believe that women outnumber them; hence, it is wise to marry more than one to reduce their population as well as to ensure that no woman lives without a man. Therefore, in doing this, many see it as a way of helping the female gender and hence, expect to be treated like an egg by these women.

The attempt to please the men, therefore, sometimes results in double-crossing and all manner of intrigues by these women as they have been made to believe that getting another husband elsewhere is not so easy. This turns most Izon men to be demi-gods who seek to be appeased by their wives through various means, whether in cash or kind. Any woman resists this culture risks the love her husband who concentrates on those other women who daily fete him and worship him. The faithful act of submission comes most times from among the new wives, while acts of insubordination are usually or exhibited by the older wives. This is the scenario the chant captures.

The third chant seeks to reiterate the message presented in the first chant, which is the theme of poverty and mockery. It is obvious from the chant that, the persona is a debtor and has no hope of paying off the debt as he/she perhaps is yet to be paid also by another debtor. The chant reveals practical cases in Izon land where



debtors will refer their creditors to others indebted to them. It goes to reveal how the poor provide diverse excuses to escape the insults or sanctions from the rich to whom they are indebted.

Finally, this last one is a solemn appeal to God Almighty or the gods of the land to water the land for its fertility. The persona in this song, beckons on his/her creator to bless the Izon nation for their benefit of all her children.

## II. CONCLUSION

It is true from the above that Amassoma *Seigben* festival is an embodiment of aesthetics, without which, the festival would be boring as a mere narration. Hence, one is right to say that, the success of the festival is dependent on the amount of dramatic elements such as props, costumes, chants, masquerades and archetypal elements that add more colour to the festival. Consequently, its popularity would be lost within the shortest time if these performative or artistic elements were ignored.

The study has also revealed that *Seigben* festival bridges the gap between the dead and the living as evidenced in the series of rituals carried out before, within and after the festival. It plays regenerative roles among the people. This is because, these rituals cement that ever existing link between the dead and the living by requesting the ancestors to bless and induce social, economic and material growth among the people.

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