

DYNAMICS OF PERFORMANCE ON THE AQUATIC STAGE

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INTRODUCTION

The origin of boat regattas in Izon land is traced by Henry Bellgam to the advent of the first European traders who arrived in the Niger Delta in the 15th Century. In his article "Boat Regatta" (21) Bellgam asserts that Kings and Chiefs of the Niger Delta travelled in boats either for the purposes of visiting their counterparts in the neighbouring city states or to convey their commodities of trade in boats from one market to the other. The boats carrying these valuables were paddled by men from the kings' or the chiefs' households. These treasure boats (Alali-Aru) were provided with security by another boat manned by warriors, the war boat (Omu-Aru). After the abolition of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807, a new legitimate trade in Palm produces and Palm oil flourished. The Niger Delta Chiefs became the major marketers in this legitimate trade. The markets for the commercial venture were established in the hinterlands where the chiefs who retained their slaves had to travel to sell Palm kernels and oil. This was a highly competitive venture which required able-bodied well fed men to paddle fast to make sure that they arrived early at the markets. The able-bodied men in the chiefs or kings households practiced the paddling movements to synchronize them with traditional drumming, songs and dances in the different war-canoes. Bellgam asserts that it is these creative practices that gradually developed into the aesthetically designed ceremonial events through which sports, entertainment and heritage of the people are showcased.

Aquatic theatrical performances are unique performances that take place on floating stages that are designed for specific performances. This form of performing arts is common place in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. The routine act of conveying a corpse from one village to another is a dramatic experience in the Niger Delta with its creeks and rivers. Theatrical regattas are used for ceremonial outings; the floats are mainly designed to entertain. But some of the floats in the Niger Delta are also designed for utilitarian purposes like war, the transportation of a masquerade etc.

Performances in the Niger Delta region that can be classified as aquatic theatre are the performances that are staged on the following kinds of aquatic stages, the floating, the shoreline and the fluid stages. The boat regatta is a special cultural event that celebrates the people's attachment to water and their riverine environment. There are two major regattas in Izon tradition: the war boat and the ceremonial gig. The war boats are a specialty of the Nembes and central Isons of Bayelsa state. In the days of inter-communal wars, people used war boats, fitted with cannons and other instruments of warfare and manned by warriors to fight their battles. Prominent houses in Nembe are still known to own war boats. The same is the case with the Kalabari of Rivers state. The war regattas are usually re-enacted to honour special dignitaries or they are organized to pay special tributes to very great warriors in the event of their death. On the other hand, the ceremonial gig is staged mostly during ceremonies, especially for marriages, and to herald festivals in the community.

TYPES OF STAGES

The Floating Stage: The floating stage is a common theatrical structure in the Niger Delta region, this is attributed to the fact that the daily activities of the people in the water-logged areas are carried out in the rivers, creeks and lakes. The floating stage is used to convey bodies for funeral. The boats are normally fitted with musical instruments to enable the people conveying the corpse to "Dance" the body home for the last time. This final home-coming is done to honour the corpse of a woman when she dies in her matrimonial home. These forms of aquatic performances are common among the Izon people who consider it a taboo to bury a woman in her matrimonial home. This supports a common saying in Izon land that a man only marries the flesh and not the bones which they consider to belong to the family that gave birth to the woman. Boats conveying corpses are a common sight. One common feature of such boat is that, though music is played in the boat and people dance, the boat passes villages on its route using a mid river navigational course. This can also be attributed to the belief that it is not spiritually healthy to allow people pass close to your water front with dead bodies. Another performance that uses the floating stage is the wrestling (processional performance). A champion wrestler who challenges another to a contest in Izon land is expected to travel to the village of the wrestler he has challenged with his

team in a fantastic display of manliness, singing and boasting about his previous exploits, other champions he had defeated and how he hopes to floor the one he is coming to wrestle. These aquatic displays are often very interesting because of the intensity employed to scare the opponent and those who will do the supporting bout. In the case of wrestling, the performance transcends the floating stage to the shoreline stage and even extends to the arena stage. When the performance is on the boat that is conveying the combatants, it is said to be on the floating stage and when the wrestlers disembark, it takes the quality of a shoreline stage and they then move to the arena stage where the wrestling competition takes place. It should be noted that a floating stage can take any form. It can be built to represent any creature that takes the fancy of the designers of the float and it can be built to highlight the theme of a performance or even portray the predominant occupation of the performers. The Amasinghan love boat carried the symbol of a shark when it represented Bayelsa State in the Abuja Carnival in 2007.

The Shoreline Stage: The shoreline stage plays a transitional role between the floating, fluid and the arena stages. Though the shoreline stage does not hold a performance for a long time, it plays the very important role of coordinating the flow of the performance from either the floating stage or the fluid stage to the arena stage on land. On some occasions the shoreline stages serve as a forum to consolidate a performance before moving on to the arena stage. On occasions where the float is invited to the water fronts of villages on their route to be presented with gifts by the people of the villages, the shoreline is used to display one or two of the special dance steps of the float as a show of appreciation for the gifts.

The Fluid Stage: Performance on the fluid stage is when activities take place directly on the river. As quoted in the article "Fine and Performing arts" in the book *The Land and People of Rivers State* (2002) Bell-Gam Leopold asserts that: Aquatic performances like the Odum masquerade, Ogwein and Siki performances of the Okrikas in Rivers State are performed on water courses. Other forms of performance that take place in the fluid stage include the Beni-Kemain Rituals and other actions that flow over from the floating stages. Like in the Amasinghan love boat performance, the dancers at some point get so excited that the float no longer contains them, so in their frenzied state, the performance spills over into the fluid stage.

PERFORMING IN THE AQUATIC THEATRE

The dynamics that are required to perform the aquatic theatre outweighs that of a conventional stage performance. The Director in the aquatic performance is first of all to determine the number of persons that the boat can contain before deciding on the cast of the production. The size of the boat for the performance is what dictates the size of the cast. While stage picture is used to judge the artistic maturity of a Director in the conventional theatre; stage picture seems to be the very last worry of the Director in an aquatic performance. After determining the number of artists the float can carry and placing them on board, the next thing the Director worries about is their placement on board in order to balance the float. And because different artistic activities like music, dance and song will be taking place simultaneously on the boat; the Director has to be careful in his placement of cast. It should be mentioned here that the placement of cast on board a float that will perform on the still waters of a lake is never the same with the placement of cast on a float like that performs along a river whose current flows swiftly into the sea.

After the successful placement of the cast on the floating stage, there is the need for individuals as well as groups to correctly balance themselves when dancing in the float mid-stream. This is essential because only one person who is not properly balanced at a cardinal point of the boat can overturn the boat. This factor strongly influences the selection of dance steps that are choreographed for performance on a float.

The paddling of the boat is artistically done, but it is done to move the boat forward at a pace that is appropriate for the performers to display the beauty of their dance steps to their shoreline audience. The float has to move at a particular speed to achieve this. The momentum of the paddlers are controlled and coordinated. The motion of the boat and rhythm of the paddling and the dancing on board, all combine to qualify a performance, high standard entertainment. Performance in the fluid stage occurs mostly when a float performs along the water front's of villages on its route. Women from the home town of the performers on the float who are married in these villages cheer the float from the shoreline (shoreline stage) to the river water (Fluid stage). These cases happen almost in all communities along on the route of such floats because it is the tradition of the Izon people to encourage marriages amongst neighboring villages. Thus, it

is not strange to see young men from the Izon speaking people of Delta State crossing over to marry pretty young maidens from Bayelsa State. This is made possible by the fact that the States are only separated by either the River Ramos or River Forcados. A man's father can be from Aleibiri in Bayelsa State while the mother may be from Tuomo in Delta state. This custom of intra ethnic marriages lays a foundation which fosters the unity of the neighboring villages. It is the women that perform directly in the water, the fluid stage in their excitement and enthusiasm to welcome their kinsmen.

The shoreline stage performance of the lead dancers when the boat makes its stops in the various villages has its own dynamism. While the main dancers in the float do the Agene dance step and the Penge dance step which do not strongly affect the balance of the float. The lead dancers can do the more vigorous Owu dance step to the accompaniment of the Akwa ozi (masquerade drums) when they come on land from the float. When this happens, in most cases men and women who have come to watch the love boat performances; join the lead dancers in their performance on the shoreline stage.

There is a unique audience-performers' relationship in the aquatic theatre. The Aquatic theatre performance audience, is not a conventional audience, the performance is not staged in one particular locale but moves from one location to another like productions in the medieval era where pageant wagons were used to take productions to people in their homes as recorded in Richard Southern's book *The Seven Ages Of The Theatre*.

The difference here is that the performance in the case of Aquatic theatre is done in the river on water rather than on the road. The audience is attracted to the water fronts of the different villages that are situated between the starting points to the terminal points on routes of the floats. It should be noted that at every village water front the audience coming out of the village to celebrate the performance is different from that of the next village because the audience of a particular village does not move from their village to the next village. Consequently, as the float moves on, its audience changes, and they are only connected by the performance itself. The audience is not fixed; each territory presents its own audience. So, the performance produces in the performers and the audience a sense of belonging which Schechner describes as the "Performer-to-spectator interaction" in his book *Performance Theory*(84) . Lets say if a float

starts from Ngoro, the audience is made up of the Ngoro people and when the float moves to Ojoko, the next community along the route of the float, the Ngoro audience is left behind in their community. So the audience in the Ojoko water front will now be indigenes of Ojoko community with only a small number of fishermen, traders and palm collectors in between the communities; serving as a connecting audience between the two communities that are separated by rain forests. It is this feature that makes the audience a unique audience.

Another unique thing about this audience is its audience-performer relationship; to meet the artistic requirements of the different audiences that the performers meet in the various water fronts. The dance formations, steps and structures, loved by the communities which vary are met. A display of the Owu dance step that is celebrated with enthusiasm at Ojoko, is not received with the same enthusiasm in Torugbene the next village. So the performers in a float may have to change their dance steps to the Anda Ogele dance step which is preferred by these people who love wrestling. This trend of change in performance satisfies the different audiences they encounter in the cause of the performance.

CONCLUSION

The focus of the paper is to provide a platform to investigate the dynamics of aquatic performances and provide a framework for understanding this new concept of African Theatre. The work has given a panoramic exposition of the basics in the staging of aquatic performances. As a concluding remark, it must be noted that aquatic theatre performances is a performance that gives theatrical identity to the littoral people of the Niger Delta in general and the Izon people in particular.

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