
The Dramatic Features of Alekwu Ohoweklokwu/Ije Uchulo (Dirge) Performance among the Idoma

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Abstract

The origin of drama in its written form, right from the ancient times of the Greeks and the Romans has always been in the ritual performances of the unlettered man. The Idoma Alekwu dramatic performances are a series of dramatic activities among the Idoma people which can also be considered to be ritual because, of course, they are embodiments of observances aimed at being carried out obligatorily in order to avoid negative consequences on the community. The structure of the Alekwu ritual drama is such that while it can be said to be one long drama covering many seasons and years as the case may be, it is as well segmented into four parts; independent of one another. We used pre-recorded videos and audios of Alekwu chants. Live performance of Alekwu Ohoweklokwu has also been viewed for the purpose of this research. We examined, one after the other, the various dramatic elements in the performance and discussed their implications. Our findings are that (a) the Idoma Alekwu Ohoweklokwu is a complex and ancient art which has remained relevant until today (b) like its written counterpart, the Idoma Alekwu oral performances have all the dramatic elements and features which qualify them to be drama; (c) besides the entertainment value of the Idoma Alekwu performances, the Alekwu Ohoweklokwu is didactic and as well as informative (d) the performance shouldn't be jettisoned as a result of westernization. Instead, it should be modernized to reflect contemporariness.

KeyWords: Dramatic, Features, Alekwu, Ohoweklokwu, Ije Uchulo, Performance, Dirge.

Introduction

Before western civilization came with the written literature, comprising of drama, prose and poetry, the oral literature had existed among the people. This ancient art was not just practiced orally, in fact, orality was its source of preservation. Oral literature was handed down from generation to generation by the word of mouth. The dramatic forms, right from time, originated from religious rites among the people.

When we use the term oral literature, we are interested in the type of literature which exists orally as against the type of literature that exists in the written medium. Commenting on the origin of oral literature, Myeong Do Hyeong posits that oral literature, "... dates back to the earliest human society; however early had they lived, people created stories, sometimes to entertain themselves, sometimes to educate others, and sometimes for several other purposes" (6).

Hyeong's position is true even today in the sense that the literature was oral in nature and therefore there was no document which the earliest oral literary forms could have been documented in. In fact, orality was the only form of documenting the literature at that time. For instance, oral epic such as *Gilgamesh*, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Onugbo and Oko*, *Beowulf*, *Sundiata* and *ChakatheZulu* existed orally long before they were, at one point or the other, written down as literacy spread across the world.

Before the invention of writing skill, the stories mentioned above, and many others like them which cannot all be mentioned, had been transmitted orally from one generation to the other. So, as literacy was introduced, and literacy skill began to replace oral skill, such oral literatures were written down for posterity sake.

While some cultures were lucky to have come in contact with literary civilization in the early times, which eventually led to the documentation of their oral literatures in good time, other ethnic groups like the Idoma people of Benue state only got attention in the 1950s when researchers like Professors Roy Clive Abraham and Robert G.

Armstrong became interested in both the language and literature of the Idoma people. Roy Clive Abraham and R.G Armstrong carried out series of researches in Idomaland in Idoma language, culture and literature at various times. R.G Armstrong built on the legacies R.C Abraham had left, and their efforts put together, drew great attention from both Idomaland and the global community to Idoma language and oral literature.

Professor Shamsudeen Amali, a revered Idoma oral literature scholar, throwing his weight behind the above argument once said: “Abraham laid a solid foundation for the promotion of the Idoma language, literature and culture” (13). It is upon the legacies of Abraham and Armstrong that Professor Shamsudean Amali and Professor Idris Amali anchored their intellectual bases which made them become the foremost intellectuals in the field of Idoma oral literature and Alekwu literature in particular. In fact, Shamsudeen Amali's and Idris Amali's interest in Idoma oral literature began when they served as research assistants to Professor R. G. Armstrong.

Alekwu Ohoweklokwu Performance

The Alekwu Ohoweklokwu drama is a performance that serves as a funeral service and a rite of passage among the Idoma people. In order words, this performance is to the Idoma people what funeral mass or requiem mass is to Catholicism or Christianity. It is a performance conducted by the Idoma Alekwu masquerade along with a group of women called Ichicha right before the dead lying in state. This performance precedes the burial of the de cease.

After going through all the rites of the Alekwu Obueche (the making of Alekwu), the Alekwu Ohoweklokwu is one of the most important functions of an Alekwu on earth. Since death is inevitable, it is therefore the duty of the Alekwuofa community to ensure that the funeral rites are performed each time a member of the community dies. Without this performance, it is believed that the soul of the dead shall continue to

wonder aimlessly without rest. The dead is supposed to rest in peace upon death which makes it worrisome when a dead person's spirit is left to hover around without the deserved peace after death.

Picture of Alekwu, Obiaflete and Oluba



Source: Research's Pictoral Record of Alekwu Artists

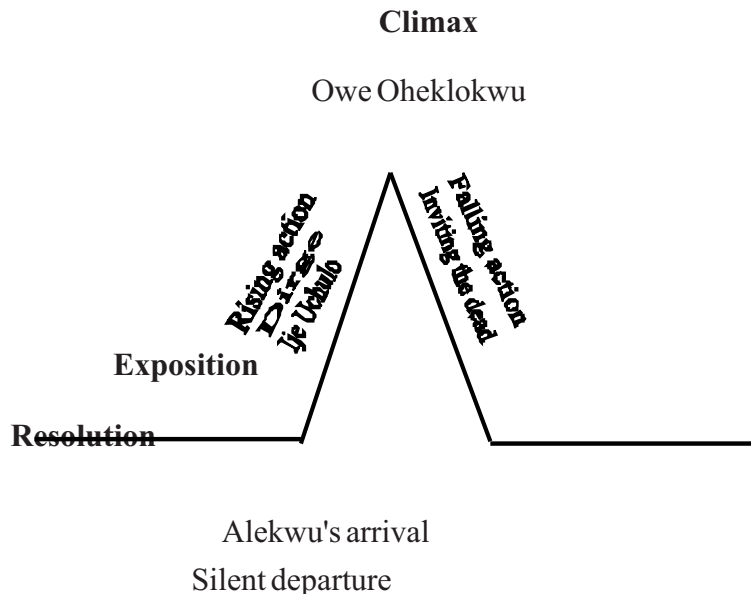
The Alekwu, having been a human being once upon a time, an ancestor and then becoming an Alekwu who now lives with the living, has the capacity to convey the dead from this world where he or she, the dead, knows and has lived and no longer belongs, to the world of the dead where he or she has never lived and therefore is not familiar with. The role of the Alekwu in this Alekwu Ohoweklokwu drama is to help the dead to reach their next destination. The Alekwu does this because of his familiarity with the destination the dead is about to head to. This drama sustains and confirms the delicate nature and cyclic nature of life. Any Alekwu can perform the above rite except an Alekwu that was a king in his life time as a human being. This is because as a king he is above certain ordinary tasks in the community.

This funeral rite is not for every person in the community. Just as an

ancestor has to meet certain criteria in order to be made an Alekwu, members of the community also have to meet certain criteria to qualify for this dramatic performance by Alekwu. One must not have died a bad death in order to qualify for the performance. A bad death in Idoma world view is to have died a mad man, to have been killed by thunder or lightening, to have died of an unknown illness and to have committed suicide. Secondly, one must at least have a child to qualify for the performance.

The Alekwu Ohoweklokwu ritual dramatic performance can be divided into five parts of the same scene; these parts are hereby represented in the diagram below:

Structure of Alekwu Ohoweklokwu



Source: Research's Diagrammatic Description of Structure of Owe Oheklokwu

The five parts of Alekwu Ohoweklokwu ritual drama are further divided into two parts in accordance with the interactions established by the Alekwu during his performance. The first two parts of the performance which are the Alekwu's arrival and the dirge are categorized under the level of human interactions while the last three parts which are the Owo Oheklokwu, inviting the dead and silent departure are categorized under the level of spiritual interactions. In other words, after the first two parts, the performance witnesses a transition from the human level of Alekwu's interaction to a spiritual level of Alekwu's interaction.

The above transition can be interpreted thus: in the first two parts the Alekwu interacts with and performs with human beings. During the Alekwu's arrival as indicated in the diagram above, the Alekwu engages human beings with chants as he makes his way to the Itakpa (reception hut) where the corpse lies in state. In the second part which is tagged Ije Uchulo (dirge) as indicated in the diagram above, the Alekwu performs the Idoma official (fixed and sacred) dirge with the Ichicha age grade and the audience joining to sing the choruses.

The second level, which is the spiritual level, sees the Alekwu performing in the last three parts of the entire Alekwu Ohoweklokwu ritual drama with spirits. In the first part of the last three parts, the Alekwu summons, one after the other, all the lands upon which the community had settled in the course of their migration from Apa to the present homeland. He calls on the lands to come and help him take the child (the dead) to Emaidu (land of the dead). After summoning the lands, he begins by summoning all the fore-fathers of the deceased, one after the other, in a genealogical and descending order to come and take the child to Emaidu.

In the second part of the second level, the Alekwu in a dramatic and symbolic fashion touches the legs of the dead with his afia saying: “Gwo kele gwo, gwo kele gwo, gwo kele gwo”. This means: “stand up let's go, stand up let's go, stand up let's go.” In the third part of the second and spiritual level, it is believed that the spirit of the dead actually gets up and follows the Alekwu. At this point, the Alekwu departs swiftly in what is a drama of silence.

According to Idris Amali, the Alekwu Ohoweklokwu is a historical reconstruction because each time it is performed, the origin, genealogy, history and migration of the Idoma people are investigated in a beautifully performed poetry chant. In other words, when all Alekwu Ohoweklokwu in Idomaland are put together, the entire history of the people is almost told.

The Performance of Ije Uchulo (Dirge)

It is F.B.O. Akparobaro's view that “The most basic characteristic of oral literature is that it is a performed expression, by this, we mean that an oral literary expression exists as a performance” (4). In fact, Ruth Finnegan puts it more succinctly as she says “There is no mystery about the first and most basic characteristic of oral literature” (qtd in Akparobaro4). It is safe then to say that the soul, mind and body of oral literature lie in performance.

The Idoma dirge (Ije Uchulo) is official and fixed in the sense that that the performers are under strict obligations to follow certain rules and perform the dirge in its exact content and manner of composition. Discretion on the part of the performers is highly limited in order to avoid missing the fixed stanzas or violating the rules. The dirge is still intact in its archaic form especially in its language and thematic preoccupation. The performance of the dirge is done in an antiphony manner between the Alekwu and Ichicha group throughout the twenty-one stanzas.

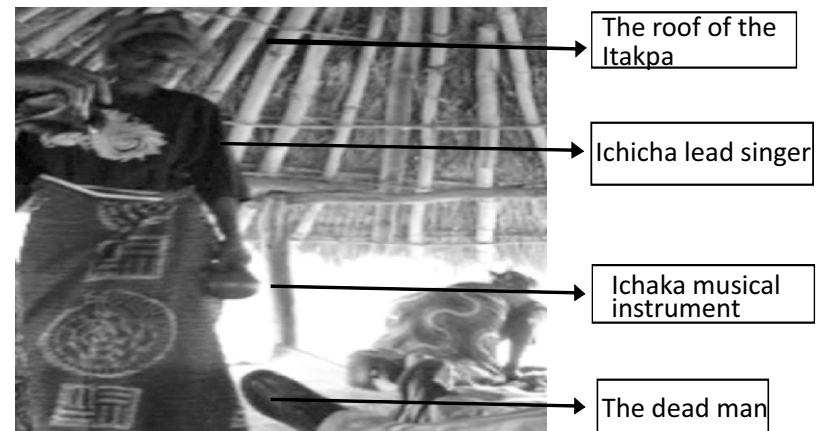
| A young person | A middle-aged person | An old person | An old and Alekwu aspirant |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| 1st - 3 rd Stanzas | 1st- 7th Stanzas | 1st -14th Stanzas | 1st - 21st Stanzas |

Below is the nature of the performance of the Idoma dirge.

Source: Research's Tabular Description of Dirge Performance

During the dirge performance, the Alekwu and the Ichicha group move their bodies in a rhythmic manner to the beats of the songs and musical instruments. Some members of the audience also join in the body movement, clapping of hands and stamping of feet. All these create magical, visual and audio effects which at the end enhance the performance of Idoma dirge. Also in the course of the performance of the dirge, the tripod of the performance: the Alekwu, Ichicha and the members of the audience imitate actions of certain elements or objects mentioned in the antiphonic dialogues between the Alekwu and the Ichicha.

A Scene of Dirge Performance in the Itakpa



Source: Research's Pictoral Record of Dirge Performance

The Alekwu takes the first stanza thus:

| Idoma language | English |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| Onyodoma klikpa | Barren woman covers calabash |
| Onyodoma klikpa o | Barren woman covers calabash |
| bege ne l' ikpa bobo | Backs calabash like baby |
| Onyodoma klikpa | Barren woman covers calabash |

The Alekwu bends backward, throws his afia backward with the multi-coloured ropes on the afia touching his back to demonstrate the way a woman backs a baby on her back. This demonstration creates a pictographic effect and creates a beautiful imagery in the eyes of the audience. The imagery further adds and buttresses the issues being raised in the song. The members of the audience who have chosen to side with the Alekwu in the antiphonic dialogue touch their backs with the hands.

In response to the Alekwu's first stanza of attack, the Ichicha group sings:

Idoma

Ichicha: Ekwu nyababo Onyukpanu nyabo nyabo

Audiene: Ekwu nyababo Onyukpanu nyabo nyabo

English

Ichicha: Death and bareness are ancient and Alekwu knows

Audience: Death and bareness are ancient and Alekwu knows

Their rebuttal is to the effect that death and barrenness have been part of human existence and the barren women are not to blame. While they sing this they keep placing the back of their hands on their palm interchangeably. The members of the audience who have chosen the side of the Ichicha join the Ichicha to respond in same gesture. The gesture is emphatic in their pronouncement of the meanings embedded in the songs.

The third stanza has the first line “A wu gbe ne gbene gbene ka cha l' aje” which means “You bailed the water to the extent that you met the floor”. This stanza refers to a communal practice of fishing where a section of the river is left with water and during the dry season all members of the community come out with their bails to scoop the water in order to expose the fishes trapped in there. The Alekwu in this stanza tells the barren women to behave like the community. He tells them to keep trying and their efforts will pay at the end just like the community gets many fishes that are trapped in the pond or river. For the Alekwu, if the barren women keep trying, like the trapped fishes are revealed, their own children will eventually come to them. In response, the Ichicha women in their stanza four sang about someone who has done her best and cannot be blamed for doing nothing. In their words “A w' enyi enyi na du a kw' ebe ni e ...” which means when “You bail water again and again and you do not catch fish...” Both the Alekwu and the Ichicha women demonstrate the bailing of water while they sing their stanzas. The Ichicha women hold calabashes which they use to show efforts in scooping water. This demonstration or gestures of scooping water is meant to depict the fact that the barren have tried and did not just fold their hands.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Idoma Alekwu Ohoweklokwu and Ije Uchulo ritual are dramatic performances rich in all the features found in dramatic

literature. Dramatic features such as audience, action, actors, stage, costume, story, etc are all contained in both performances. Also, dramatic techniques are employed by both Alekwu and the human characters. Techniques such as use of music, gestures, lighting, dance, suspense and others are employed to make the performance lively. We also discovered in the research, that the performance has a five-part plot namely the arrival, dirge performance, Alekwu Ohoweklokwu (the climax), inviting the dead and silent departure. We also discovered that the performance enhances the knowledge of the people's history in the sense that each time Alekwu Ohoweklokwu is conducted, both the history of the deceased's settlements down to the present and the genealogy of the deceased are traced to a place and a putative father in the ancient past. It is also interesting to note that the Ije Uchulo employs the antiphony style which makes the dirge performance, from stanza one to stanza twenty-one, a dialogue between the Alekwu and the Ichicha group. The audience at the arena of performance serves as the chorus.

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