

Performance in Itsekiri Moonlight Games And Songs

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Abstrat

Moonlight plays and their performances are major art forms still existing in most African societies. Among the Itsekiri people of Nigeria, the several genres of oral performances that have been researched and documented include the *Ife*, *Owe*, *The Itsekiri language* and *Umale Okere*. However, very little attention and studies have been committed to the oral performance of Itsekiri moonlight plays. Moonlight plays expose the participants to realities of human situations, problems, feelings and relationships. Moonlight plays are performed by children as well as teenagers whose ages fall between 3 and 17, adults often make up the audience. It is a game that consists of several creative activities that serve as veritable mirror and cultural preserver in Itsekiri communities. This paper therefore investigates the style and evaluates the artistic importance in the oral performance of Itsekiri moonlight plays with the aim of exploring its significance in the life of the people. The sociological approach to literature is employed in this paper to examine the ethical and moral values of these plays as a means of cultural reintegration of the young to the society. The paper concludes that more researchers need to be involved in study in goral traditional performances by children. Especially, how the oral enactments in African traditional societies propagate, sustain and preserve the cherished social norms of the African people in the face of contemporary challenges especially the new media.

Keywords: Moonlight play; Performance; Itsekiri, Songs, Player.

Introduction

Traditional oral art still plays a dominant role in shaping the lives of the people in many societies especially in Africa. Oral art exposes both audience and participant to realities of human situations, problems, feelings and relationships. This paper investigates the different dramatic and performance aesthetics in the moonlight games of the Itsekiri people of Delta State, Nigeria. Before Chinua Achebe had come into the literary scene in Nigeria in 1958 with his famous novel, *Things Fall Apart*, D. O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutola, Cyprain Ekwensi, among others, had contributed immensely in importing the morality tales from African oral narratives into their creative works. This study chiefly focuses on the forgotten aspects of the Itsekiri culture represented in their folk narratives and songs.

While the Nigeria Civil War may have accounted for why, in the last four decades, most Itsekiri youths moved from their roots, the prospection for greener pastures has also been another prominent reason for which they have lost touch with their cultural heritage. These facts have also instigated the loss of touch with their oral tradition. From this study, it is obvious that the Itsekiri people have their own body of literature; children's songs, poetry, tongue twisters, drama and recitation. People are attracted to this performance because they are enjoyable, they inform, instruct, educate and socialize, by acting as a vehicle for cultural propagation and provide an enjoyable escape from reality. They also inculcate such societal values as discipline, honesty, tolerance, sincerity; and they provide for the mental alertness and physical fitness of the young ones. Although, the plays and games may be devoid of trophies, medals or shields; participants derive joy, satisfaction and confidence that cannot be overrun by their neighbours, especially when there is war. Before we proceed to the significance of Itsekiri moonlight plays, it is important for us to undertake an overview of the Itsekiri people?

The Itsekiri also called Isekiri are an ethnic group of Nigeria's Niger

Delta area. They presently number almost a million people, living mainly in the Warri South, Warri South West and Warri North local government areas of Delta State, on the Atlantic Coast of Nigeria. Significant communities of Itsekiri people can be found in parts of Edo and Ondo states. There have over eighty-seven towns, villages and hamlets within the Niger-Delta. The uniqueness of the Itsekiri people has made them sustain the monolithic culture of having one king and one language. They are most hospitable in welcoming people of other nationalities.

This study of performance has always been most exciting in oral literature, given that it is germane to its sustenance and transmission. While oral performance involves literature delivered by word of the mouth, there are varying typologies of performance from one community to the other, depending on such factors as age and energy of the performer, the nature of the occasion and audience. Thus, Ruth Finnegan observes that,

The significance of performance in oral literature goes beyond a mere matter of definition: for the nature of the performance itself can make an important contribution to the impact of the particular literary being exhibited (5).

Performance, in this context, is the artistic presentation of an oral art before an audience. The performance of an oral art varies in Itsekiri culture and, it involves the expressiveness of tone, gesture, facial expression, dramatic use of pause and rhythm, interplay of passion, dignity of humour and receptivity to the reactions of the audience. This adheres in line with Finnegan's point that, "bare words cannot be left to speak for themselves" (46). What this means is that factors and resources are involved in the ability to understand the delivery of words in the tradition of the people. One of such resources is the histrionics of performance, which, is movement made with any part of the body as a way of dramatizing actions during performance. In essence, oral

performance can only be realized when it is actually performed. Oral performance necessarily develops its own methodology and its artistic approach basically in the mouth of the performer. These performances also portray natural phenomena like landscapes, plants and creatures in the same lively language. It also recounts events and happenings in our lives and in the history of our societies. Hence these performances stimulate our observation and imagination. When a traditional art is well performed within its cultural context, we begin to understand the things described better and in a new light. For instance, during moonlight plays, the audiences are the only context within which an oral performance makes any sense, with poetry, drama and dance playing a very important role. Virtually, all plays have songs that enhance performance. Itsekiri moonlight play songs relate issues that pertain to education, praise, religion, protest, love and they satirizes human fables. Most songs are borne out of individual experience. Others are however composed as compliment to story-telling, events, for praise to applaud a good work, criticize or mock (satirize) a wrong act or abuse. In the course of play no musical instruments are employed, only clapping and cheering. Participants/contestants don't get support from the audience, they are left to depend entirely on the skill with which they can match strength and wisdom stored in their memories with the subtleness of their voice. Dancing is a whole part of the performance. This makes the performance a thoroughly attractive spectacle. Some of these plays are synonymous with the popular Udje dance song tradition of the Urhobo people of Nigeria, because it employs the indices of attack and rejoinder in their enactments.

Dramatic performance is another aspect of oral literature. They are usually demonstrations that are often highly dramatic and picturesque in form. They are also colourful and entertaining. Such spectacular shows are for people to see. These dramatic performance goes beyond entertainment, festivals and rituals, but also to shape the creativity and ingenuity of the child as he/she grows up and finds his/her niche within the various social boundaries. Story-telling among the Itsekiri

presents a unique kind of performance. One prominent example is Olikperebu, with the narrator different from the performer, this embraces Okpewho's reference to a report by two British scholars:

It would need a combination of phonograph and cinematograph to reproduce a tale as it is told. One listens to a clever story-teller as was our old friend Mungalo, from whom we derived many of these tales (Smith & Dale 336).

Oral tradition makes us aware of ourselves, other human beings, our environment and our history through folktales, songs, proverbs, riddles and jokes with the use of colourful words and vivid images. In some societies, especially Itsekiri, traditional oral art like the moonlight plays still constitute a dominant role in shaping their lives.

Among the Itsekiri, for instance, performance plays an exigent utilitarian role from childhood to adulthood in the total life of every individual in the society. Both children and adults are directly or indirectly involved in the performances. This paper is inclined to effecting, the relevance of oral literature in modern African society.

Itsekiri moonlight games, as a traditional performance, provides children within the ages of 6 to 16 years the opportunity to interact and socialize. Moonlight plays and songs take place after dinner, to soothe the day's hustle, entertain and for an informal method of traditional education where children learn moral lessons. At night, it is not particularly shiny because of the transition between limited light and total darkness. While it may not be established when these games originated, it is often seen to date back to the very beginning of the Itsekiri people. Moonlight performances were still being fully observed until the 1990s. These performances take place in the bigger family compounds or the village square. In most cases, because the moonlight does not provide a full glimmer of light, there is often semi-darkness, depending on the size and position of the moon, which births light from the soft glowing light sky. Itsekiri Moonlight plays and songs do not only

play a very important role in socializing the young in society, they provide for scintillating recreation among participants. Participants are able to train the body, muscle, lungs and promotes mental alertness, thus they are healthy because of the rigorous exercise. In the course of play, participants learn to compose words, learn rhymes and Itsekiri poetry. It is an open opportunity to be good players, strive to win and adhere to instruction/rules. Shy participants eventually gets confident, learn to be patient, humble, obedient and humorous.

Performances in Selected Moonlight Songs

These performances are usually done in groups. The groups could be large, small, with odd or even by number, depending on the game. What determines the make-up of these groups include; the gender, age and strength of the participants. The performance is open to all children within the age group irrespective of gender, background, religion or family status within the society, requiring no special training or skills by participants to partake. Before the advent of Western education and after, the Itsekiris the moonlight plays is used to educate, inform and keep the children fit. Therefore anyone that knows the song could be the lead singer. In this regard, the lead player starts the song, while the other player chorus; “Abere abere ma” while the others chant the chorus “Abere ma”. As he leads the singing, he swings both hands back and forth almost touching his chest, while he bends backwards to the song's rhythm till he gracefully reaches the ground with both hands, first with his right hand then the left. In the course of bending the player must not bend his/her knees. This goes on till every participant takes turn. This performance trains children to be physically fit; hence, they can bend backwards without bending the knees. It is a good waist and trunk exercise.

ABERE MA

Abereaberema abere	well done players well done
Abere abere ma abere	well done players well done
Abereaberema abere	well done players well done

Abere abere ma abere	well done player well done
Odidin to wi ololo	the lid on a bottle well done player
Owun biri ololo we ri uli	would go home with the bottle

EKOKORO (Knock on the head)

This play starts in a dialogue, with each session ending in a short song and clap. It is a competition which involves two leaders, who select members of their individual teams. The two teams stand in line facing each other while the leaders stand between the two groups. Each of the leaders blindfolds a member from the opposing team and then calls someone from his/her own team to knock the blindfolded person. The person comes forward when the player shouts;

“ekokorowakan”!	
“ekokorowakan”!	Knock his/her head
“ekokorowakan”!	Knock his/her head

Thereafter, the blindfold is taken off so that the one goes to identify who knocked him/her. While the player is searching for the culprit, both groups would be chanting;

Oruko mi yon	My name is fascinating
Oruko mi yon	My name is fascinating

This is made to confuse him/her from knowing who really gave the knock, this goes on till he picks someone whether right or wrong. In most cases there is no response from the group, what happens is that everyone keeps quiet after the knock until the member blindfolded earlier would make a right or wrong guess of who knocked his/her head. With correct identification, the identified becomes a captive of the opposite team. If he fails to identify the one who had knocked him, he becomes a captive of the opposite team. The game continues till every participant takes a turn. In the course of the performance of this game, real names are not used. The material for this play is a piece of cloth for the blindfold. "Ekokoro" is a rigorous physical exercise that trains the

child's whole body and mind. It enhances the child's intellectual capacity, a form of psychological training.

FIFE MO FEE

Most words in this pun (akpebuwanje) are meaningless

Fife mofe	I love you
Fife ololo	Love of bottle
Ololoagada	Bottle between legs
Agadajuuya	Suffering in between legs
Ojeuyameefa	Suffering in six places
Koko- olugbooro	Long mix
Koko- ajagbooro	
Oseagadaesenween	
Reen weeken!	

Participants stand in a circle with the player in the middle while the player who is the lead singer points his/her index finger at each participant as the song goes on. The song ends with the participant saying "Weeken", the last person the player points at, takes his/her place in the middle of the circle. It continues till everyone plays the player. The lead singer should neither be slow or too fast but maintain a steady tempo in his/her rendition. "Fife Mo Fe" performance signifies that children an easily learn rhymes, tongue twisters, poetry and learn to compose words.

MAFUN UNA

Itsekiri

Solo

Ma fuununa
 Ma fuununa
 Ma fuununa
 Ee se una re ke

Chorus

Unaegha
 Unaegha
 Unaegha
 gidiniuwere wee

Translation

Solo

I want fire
 I want fire
 I want fire
 Is that not fire there

Chorus

No fire
 No fire
 No fire

This is preferable for children of same age. All participants form a circle holding hands with one player in the middle. The player who is asking for fire goes round with hands together, hitting lightly on every lock. The moment he/she senses a weak lock, he says "Ee se una re kegidiniuwere wee" and tries to break the circle. If he succeeds another person takes his place, if he doesn't he continues till he gets a replacement. In the performance of "Ma fuununa" the individual strength is put to test, because what the middle player is looking for is a weak link and no one wants to be seen as weak. Hence, the show of strength with their partner in unity. From plays like these children know the importance of team work and bring it into their day to day living.

MU NI EYIN

Mu nieyin (put at the back)
 E eeeee!

Solo
 Chorus

A large circle of participants is made with everyone sitting, except the lead player. The player or lead participant holds a ball made of cloth and then runs round the circle shouting; "Mu nieyin o!" while others respond "Eeeeeee". At a point, he secretly drops the ball, behind a participant he chooses. If the participant fails to notice or detect the ball behind him/her before the player comes round again, he gets a tap on the buttocks and the game continues. But if the participant takes not, he quickly picks the cloth ball and starts shouting; "Mu nieyin o!". As the performance goes on, no participant must look behind them or give information about the placement of the ball. This performance builds children sensitivity and ability to detect things around them. It helps to combine body

alertness and the mind. This is because as the player goes round the participants, everyone is alert to know where the ball would drop.

TEREE O TEREE O!

Teree o teree o, tereeginagina
 TeereeIroorooton mi, tereeginagina
 TeereeOgboduoton mi, tereeginagina
 Teree o, teree o. tereeginagina

ENGLISH

Yours o yours o, yours say it say it
 Yours Irooro my child, yours say it say it
 Yours Ogbodu my child, yours say it say it
 Yours o yours o, yours say it say it

The materialsthat are used for this game are seven kernel, nuts or small sticks. There are usually less than ten participants. As all the participants come together, two of them would volunteer to lead. Each of the leaders would also choose members for the two teams. The two teams stand a good distance apart, facing each other. Distance should be average of twenty meters as it is a major factor in the game. A leader in one of the team starts off by hopping from his/her position towards the direct opponent he/she drops a nut, kernel or stick in his palm. Hops around the other opponent, until all nuts are dropped in his palm, then hops back without changing legs. The other team leader continues until all participants take their turn.

Once a participant starts hopping round, he chants “Teree o teree o!” other participants take the chorus; “Tereegina gina!”. This performance plays more significant role amongst others. It does not just serve as a body exercise for the fitness of the legs, the hopping around builds their stamina for other contests. The strive to win is birthed by self-discipline, thus children grown into adults knowing the importance of discipline

This is a hide and seek game. Participants gather and draw a large circle, with the lead player in the middle. The circle symbolizes the safe zone. The lead player whose eyes are shut, shouts “Otoori”, participants responds, “E te too” while trying to hide themselves.

OTOORI

Solo	Chorus
Otoori!	Eete to
Otoori o	Eeete to
Demi wa	in in
Demi wa	In in
Mo wa	In in
Otorioooo	O to ren

Translation

Solo	Chorus
Is it time	Not yet
Is it time	Not yet
Should I come	No no
Should I come	No no
Am coming	No no
Is it time	It is okay

The first person or persons that successfully get good hiding places call out “O to ren” (it is time). That response permits the lead performer to start searching for them. In the course of searching, players try to get back to the marked circle without being caught. Mere touch signifies being caught. The person that gets caught before reaching the circle takes the place of the lead player. It continues till participant gets tired. This performance builds and makes children psychologically competent. The moment the lead player goes into the circle, he automatically sees his/herself competent to get a replacement.

EJOJI KAN EKUN

This is both an indoor and outdoor play, for both boys and girls with at least seven participants. All participants sit on the mat with their legs stretched out, while the player stays behind the participants. The participants play the role of “Oli-noli” (landlord) and player gets the role of “Ejoji” (Visitor). The performance begins when “Ejoji” knocks behind the first participant. The participant queries him, hence the dialogue. He moves from the first person to the other till he/she gets to the last person. The sequence of the dialogue must be strictly followed. “Ejoji” performance teaches children patience, simple courtesy of talking to stranger and obedience. In the dialogue the ejoji is overtly patience while the oli-noli responds with utmost courtesy hence, a successful dialogue was achieved. It also displays the importance of showing love and the essence of mutual cooperation.

Itsekiri**Translation**

Ejoji: “Kpoo-kpoo-kpoo”	Visitor: “Knock knock”
Oli-noli: “Nésínrèwíeyínèdùkùlí	Landlord: “Who is at the backyard of
Íyémi birí owà mi?”	My mother and father”
Ejoji: “Emi OdiboOritse ren”	Visitor: “I am God's servant!”
Oli-noli: “Nikowofe sin?”	Landlord: “What do you want?”
Ejoji: “Èyènkékéré mófègbà gbiÀlàbarà mi!	Visitor: “Little palm kernel for my parrot”
Oli-noli: “Gbakekere di wojukekere Si gbe mi”	Landlord: “Take some and leave some for me”.
Ejoji: “No kanwa mu gbe mi!”	Visitor: “Give me some yourself”
Oli-noli: “Omawiesen mi!”	Landlord: I have a baby on my leg.
Ejoji: “Gbe oma si ale”	Visitor: “Put the baby on the floor”
Oli-noli: “Ale ti emi”	Landlord: “The floor is mine”
Ejoji: “Gbe oma si ere!”	Visitor: “Put the baby on the mat”
Oli-noli: “Ere ti mi!”	Landlord: “The mat is mine”
Ejoji: “Gbe oma si ukpekele!”	Visitor: “Put the baby on the cabinet”

Oli-noli: “Ukpekelele mi”	Landlord: “The bed is mine”.
Ejoji: “Gbe si ubokubodede!”	Visitor: “Put the baby anywhere”
Oli-noli: “Ubokubodedetemi!”	Landlord: “Everywhere is mine”.

AGBANYEGHEYEGHE

Participants stand in a circle, with a participant kneeling with hands on the ground. As the song starts he tries to dance to the rhythm. The lead performer standing behind him assists him/her to dance by supporting the waist (trunk). Performance like this should be recommended for shy children. It is an exercise that concentrates on the fitness of the knees and waist. It also illustrates on the fundamentals of friendship choice and cautions children in their choice of friends, for not all that glitters is gold.

Itsekiri**Translation**

“Nesin re wee ee”	Who is your favourite?
Aghanyeeegheyeeghe se ke se ee	Aghan tall and sleeky
“Ofisele, re we?”	Is ofisele your favourite?
Aghanyeeeghesese se	Aghan tall and sleeky

OLIKPEREBU**Itsekiri****Translation**

Olikperebu egueremi – Eyere	My beautiful and lovely – this is life
Olikperebu egueremi – Eyere	My beautiful and lovely – this is life
Ireyebieukun we je o – Eyere	Human proposed you refused – this is life
Umale bie ukun we je o – Eyere	Masquerade proposed you refused – this is life
Egungunbieukun we je o – Eyere	Spirits proposed you refused – this is life
Ere wa do wa do ee – Eyere	It's snake you will marry – this is life
Ere ma fenmi ee kpoti – Eyere	If snake swallows you, it won't vomit you – this is life
Anamiwoliwoli – Eyere	My In law come, come in – this is life

Ejoruneeakon mi anami o – Eyere I can't sleep, can't sleep my in-law – this is life

This is either done alone or as a play with a dance. A pretty lady sits in the middle, with different suitors proposing to her. She rejects every one of them; tall, rich and handsome. Eventually, an unknown man comes in to ask for her hand in marriage. She quickly accepts and they both departed that same day. It was unknown to her that the man she accepted as a husband is a snake that borrowed human parts to marry her. On their way, everyone from whom he had borrowed body parts, he gives back. The moment he turns into the snake, she (Olikperebu) is scared to death, but there is nothing she could do. The snake starts licking her body. The player representing the snake would start a dance like walk like a very big snake with tongue out, acting like he/she is licking Olikperebu's body. This illustrates the covert and overt effects of being choosy like Olikperebu without listening to her parents. This performance guides children against making choices without listening to their parents, because they would always guide them on the right path.

Most of the performance enhances physical fitness because during play the waist, knees and trunk are rigorously moved, team work, honesty and competitive mood is encouraged. Also courtesy, obedience, discipline, show of affection and tolerance which is seen in "Ejoji Kan Ekun" can be learnt. Confidence is built, learning to use the human senses effectively, alertness, ability to guess correctly and enablement of the combination of the body and mind is achieved. These moonlight performances create opportunity to test individual strength as seen in "Mu neyin" and "Tere o".

Conclusion

From the foregoing therefore, moonlight games and plays in the Itsekiri society and indeed other African societies serves as a means of socialization for the young ones. It enables them to fraternize and also to learn the cultural values of the people. However, the aspect of the

people's culture is fact eroding, due to modernization and emergence of new media of entertainment. This paper has thus brought to the fore, the rich cultural heritage of the Itsekiri people and how they can be inculcated into the school curriculum. Moreover, they contain useful information and skills which we learn as we enjoy ourselves.

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