Mmanwu as a Pivotal Aspect of the African Drama; an Appraisal of the Performance of Njokoya

Abstract: Masquerading is an important aspect of the Igbo culture and it is used for the entertainment pleasure of the audience. During certain occasions and festivals, Mmanwu performs to delight as well as educate the audience. In addition to the enlightenment and pleasure that mmanwu offer when they perform, they also have other crucial functions in the society such as using their chants to criticize societal ills for social reformation. Mmanwu is also used for the settlement of certain customary disputes. In the pre-colonial Africa, Masquerading used to be a fundamental aspect of the African drama. However, with the coming of the Europeans with their sinister aim to annihilate the African way of life in favour of theirs, Africans got disillusioned about masquerading as they were given the impression that masquerading is idolatry. Gradually, the import of Mmanwu in the society began to diminish bit by bit. Despite the aspersions by the unwary Europeans, African theatre can never be discussed in isolation from Mmanwu. Therefore, in this paper, the researcher examines the features of drama in Mmanwu with particular reference to Njokoya. The researcher considers other theoretical approaches and sees the Sociological approach as the most appropriate theory for the paper.

Keywords: Mmanwu, Njokoya, Drama, Africa, European.

INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe has categorically stated that African man did not hear of culture for the first time from the white man. He sees no reason why the chauvinistic Europeans who he believed are grossly ignorant of the tenets of the Africa should be prejudiced about the continent to the extent of disparaging Africa. He makes it vivid that the Europeans know little or nothing about Africa and therefore, they should not display their ignorance by talking about Africa. The truth has remained that from the onset, Europeans have been prejudiced about Africa and they never believed that there is anything good about Africa. Many Europeans demonstrated their aversion for Africa via their literary piece. Joseph Conrad for instance, in his Heart of Darkness portrays Africans as bloodthirsty and living in the wilderness. However, Achebe and other concerned Africans frown about the absurd representation of Africa. The author demonstrates his acquaintance with the African society. George Hegel for instance, is a 19th century German philosopher and whose submission that “… At this point we leave Africa, not even to mention it again, for it is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit” is not only fallacious but also aggravating. Okoh goes further to disclose that the Greek geographer, Herodotus describes Africa in his book as a land where huge serpents were found, and lions, and also wild men and wild women.

Responding to Conrad and the other chauvinistic Europeans, Achebe vivifies in his Things Fall Apart that before the white man came, Africa had rich cultural heritage. The rich cultural heritage of Africa, Achebe alleges, was rather antagonized by the European whom he says, has put a sword in the thing that held us together so that we have fallen apart. Part of the tradition of the Africa which must not be allowed to be swept into the carpet is Mmanwu.

Theoretical Framework

Sociological Approach is believed to be the most appropriate literary theory for this paper.
literature as social commentary. Ann B. Dobie, in *Theory into Practice: an Introduction to Literary Criticism*, discloses that the French critic, Hippolyte Taine was one of the earliest sociological theorists and that he listed three major factors he believed to determine a work of art to include: race, milieu and moment. By race, Taine referred to national characteristics typically found in works of art produced by the creative artists of a given country. Race, Taine believed to mean culture and by milieu, he meant environment and by moment, he meant personal influence. Sociological approach, therefore, prescribes that literature is an expression of society for it originates in society. This approach maintains that literature is not detached from the society, hence it is the choice of the researchers in this paper.

**The Mmanwu in Igbo Culture**

Mmanwu is vital part of the Igbo tradition. There is virtually no part of the Igbo tradition that doesn’t value masquerade hence during certain traditional festivals in any part of Igbo, Mmanwu would feature. In an interview with Mazi Okuma from Arondizogu, the import of Mmanwu in Igbo tradition can never be overemphasized. Mazi Okuma is an elder in Arondizogu, a popular traditionalist and ardent lover of tradition and culture. According to him, apart from the entertainment that masquerade offers the people, Mmanwu performs many other indispensable tasks. In his words, “mmanwu is used by our people to settle disputes; when two persons, groups or even clans have a dispute which proves difficult to be settled, once mmanwu comes in, the matter is over. Mmanwu does not hide truths from people and the guilty person has nothing to do to mmanwu for disclosing the bitter truth afterall, mmanwu is not a human being but a representative of the ancestors. As a human, you can’t fight a war with spirit of your ancestors. Nobody fights his chi and wins in the battle.” Chinua Achebe had earlier vivified this fact in his *Arrow of God*, when dramatizing the role of masquerade in traditional Igbo society. In the novel, we see the crucial role of Ogbazuluobodo in social reformation. Achebe chronicles the task of Ogbazuluobodo to include acting as police to maintain law and order in the society. Certain herculean communal tasks like settling disputes are the tasks of Ogbazuluobodo. Ogbazuluobodo would, without mincing words and without fear, blame the guilt and warn him never to make trouble again. Because Mmanwu is believed to be sacred and a visitor from the spirit, the guilt would do exactly as the Mmanwu has said.

G. T. Basden in his *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, clearly demonstrates that Mmanwu is crucial in Igbo society. He makes it vivid that Mmanwu is valued in all parts of the Igbo when he says that “The ceremony of making “maw” (juju) prevails throughout the Ibo country (116b). According to him, men dress themselves in wield costumes covering every part of their body and disguise their voices by means of a small instrument in their mouth. He discloses that the masked men (Mmanwu) represent spirits. These spirits are accorded some respect as they are believed to have come as visitors from the world beyond to perform certain tasks (116b).

During funerals, masquerades perform to entertain the audience. The members of the audience watch and listen to the chants of the masquerades which are usually hilarious and as the audience watch and listen to them, the mourners tend to forget the perils associated with the loss of their beloved relations. As the masquerades perform on stage, they speak against social ills without fear. If the deceased was rumoured to have been killed by anybody, the masquerades deride the culprits. What ordinarily, human beings would dread to say for fear of incarceration, would be said by the masquerades and people would laugh. Njokoya, like other masquerades, use laughter as in satire as a weapon and when he derides, the concerned would feel the pain and tend to take corrections. This is the primary duty of satire. During certain occasions and festivals like the Opalla festival, new yam festival and similar other festivals in different parts Igbo land, different masquerades perform to delight the teeming spectators.

**Functions of Mmanwu in the Pre-colonial Africa**

One of the prominent traditionalists in Umuawulu, Chief Evans Nwobu Nwafo was interviewed by the researcher few years ago. Nwobu was one of the adherents of the tradition and he was a veteran carrier of Mmanwu (Onokwu) while he lived. According to him, the function of Mmanwu can never be over emphasized and that any society that bans Mmanwu would soon discover that her future generation would wallow heavily in ignorance. He affirms that although some sacrilegious people, under the cloak of Mmanwu, perpetuate various degrees of atrocities, such act shouldn’t undermine the indispensability of Mmanwu in Igbo society. He is of the opinion that every society knows bad people among them and so, he suggests that such evil people should be banned from participating in masquerade activities. In his own voice, “Mmanwu is what a society is known for and Mmanwu performs tremendous tasks for sanity of the society.” When asked to give a picture of one of the functions of masquerade in the society, Nwobu Nwafo cleared his throat and said “Which one do I mention and leave the other? What other means did our fathers use to recover debts, settle disputes and criticize sacrileges if not Mmanwu?” He argues that if Mmanwu is abrogated in Igbo societies, “Atrocities” as he puts it, would wear clothes and take sharp knives to cause mayhem in the societies.

In an informal discussion with Okike, the carrier of Njokoya, he says that no matter how civilized a particular society is, such society should never think of obliterating masquerades and their performances as
doing so would spell doom for the future of the society. He discloses that Mmanwu is a traditional affair used by different communities to perform various roles and he wonders why the traditional rulers who are supposed to be custodians of tradition should support the abrogation of Mmanwu. He lists among other indispensable functions of Mmanwu to include entertainment of the audience and helping to douse tensions. Illustrating further, Okike says that Masquerades perform in Ofalla or Igu Aro, New Yam festival, Onwa Asato and such occasions to entertain the audience and they perform in funerals to entertain, educate as well as help the audience to forget their sorrows. According to him, any mourner who watches good masquerades perform at the funeral of a beloved would not know when he or she starts laughing and gradually, the intense pain in his or her heart fizzes away.

Basden, G. T in Among the Ibos of Nigeria is of the opinion that Mmanwu are visitors from the spirit world. According to him, “The ceremony of making ‘maw’ (ju-ju) prevails throughout the Ibo country. Men dress themselves in weird costumes covering every part of their body, and disguise their voices by means of a small instrument in the mouth (igwe). These represent re-embodied spirits (116b). He discloses that Mmanwu (maw) performs at funerals to ease tension. At funerals, the bereaved and the relatives to the deceased are in grief. The masquerade performs and the people and other people around watch and ease the tension. Their chants represent the voice of the spirits. Sometimes, the masquerades tell the people that the deceased has told them to greet them and tell them that their sufferings have come to an end. The masquerade does this just to pacify the mourners and make them strong again.

Some Popular Masquerades in Igbo Land

As Basdem disclosed, Igbo people value masquerades as they are seen as representing the ancestors. Some of the popular masquerades in Igbo include: Izaga popular in Aguleri and environs, Agaba popular in Agulu and environs, Okwomma popular in Enugu, Ano Ofia, popular in Nnewi, Ojonu popular in Arondizogu and Amesi and entire Aguata, Mgbadike and Nwaaburuja of Arondizogu, Atumma popular in Abaga, Ukoo, Abba, Nino and Ogbonike, Adamma popular in Abaga, Omate in Nsukka, Ugo popular in Dunukofia, Ijele (No specific town but popular in many parts of Anambra and Enugu. Ijele is the biggest masquerade in Sub-Saharan Africa) Enyi masquerade popular in Uke, Onukwu is popular in Umuawulu, Otaikaipo is of Mbaukwu, Njokoy in Nsukla among others. Each of these masquerades is peculiar in appearance. While some are weird and bizarre, others like Adamma and other Abogho-Mmanwu are beautiful and they are feminine. They dance and display certain acrobatics for the entertainment pleasure of their audience. They, like Atumma, accept both genders; young and old as their spectators. They are not dreadful and when they perform, men, women and children who are delighted appreciate them by clapping for them and spraying them money. Abagana in Nijikwa, Nibo in Awka South are some of the towns that have Adamma masquerade. Awgbu in Oluoma has a variety of this masquerade known as Cinema. Sometimes these masquerades are mistaken as beautiful young women.

Atumma, in one of his chants, disclosed that he is a friend of girls. Atumma is different from Adamma in appearance even though both, unlike some other masquerades, allow women and young ones to watch them. In fact, their target is always women and children as Atumma simply made it known to the public that he is friend of girls. In appearance, Atumma is masculine and unlike Adamma, does not only dance to the percussions of her followers but dances as he chants. In fact, the audience is more interested in listening to the chants of Atumma than his dancing.

In Anambra, there is Atumma Ogufoluchi of Ukpo, Atumma Ugonano of Abba, Atumma Ugoneri of Ogbumike and Atumma Ugonapo of Abaga. Omabe is a similar masquerade popular in Nsukka, Enugu State. Other similar masquerades are Ogbumgbada, Ojonu and Njokoya. Some other masquerades are dreadful and they clutch matchets when they perform. They are believed to be dangerous and that is why, like the bull, some of them have thick ropes on their waists so that one of their members, a very strong young man holds the rope to control his excesses. It is believed that if there is no such wedge, the masquerade, when inspired, could use the matchet to cause havoc. Children and women if they must watch them, would stay at a very distant place to watch the performance of such masquerades. Their dancing steps are amazing and entertaining. Agaba, Okwomma, Otaikaipo, Nkobo are among the masquerades under this category. Izaga also holds matchet but uses his to cut tree branches that stand against his way. Izaga is a very tall masquerade like electric pole, not violent but not to be dared. His costume is usually white and red. He wears a matching cap.

Mmanwu Performance as a Drama

Drama is a performance on the stage for the delight of the direct audience. Kennedy, X. J, Dana, Gioia and Mark Bauerclein in their Handbook of Literary Terms: Literature, Language, Theory describe drama as that derived from the Greek dran, which means “to do.” This simply means that drama is basically action, usually imitated. Kennedy etal maintain that drama originally named actions or deeds immediately represented, not narrated. This is exactly what we experience when we watch masquerades. The primary duties of masquerade include:

- To entertain the audience and
- To educate the audience
When masquerades perform on stage, people cluster and form the audience to watch them. The masquerades become the characters performing on the stage to delight the audience. Kennedy *etal* emphasize that one crucial fact about drama is performance. They put it thus “As opposed to fiction and poetry, dramatic compositions are designed for performance on the stage (49). Since masquerade performance is about action, the performance therefore is drama. As in the conventional drama where there are both the major and minor characters whose actions on the stage delight the audience, Njokoya and other masquerades are usually the major characters while the men who play drums and other instruments constitute the minor characters.

In many occasions, like in the case of Onukwu where there are many masquerades forming a group, one of the masquerades is the major character while the other masquerades are the minor characters. In his *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*, Barnet Sylvan sees characters as the imaginary people representing real people in a work of art. He emphasizes that characters in fictional works are distinguished among the others and that story of a narrative or dramatic is the story of the major character. This is the character that features prominently in the work and the story or dramatic piece climaxes with the character. When a group of masquerades perform on stage, we notice that one of the masquerades play leading role like Onukwu, such a masquerade is the major character. Other masquerades who perform with him and whose actions help us appreciate and understand the leading masquerade well are the minor characters. According to Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, that is the function of the minor characters: to help the audience understand and appreciate the major character. As they perform, Onukwu would occasionally fling his arm on the shoulder of the feminine masquerade and with the aid of their costume too, the audience understands that they are husband and wife. In the case of Njokoya, the minor characters are not masquerades but the boys who follow him to sing his refrain as well as beat percussions for him.

Abrams discloses that catharsis is a major element of drama. This is a way of dealing with strong emotions and feelings emanating from the actions of the characters. Where this element is absent in a drama piece, such is not qualified as a drama. As we read or watch a drama piece, we are moved to pity or joy by the activities of the characters. When there are some funny and happy episodes, the audience shouts for joy and when some tragic episodes occur, the audience feels the emotion. As masquerades perform *anwansi*, they thrill the audience so that there is *catharsis*. Whenever Njokoya performs, many people who constitute members of the audience, shout for joy and clap each time he performs some funny acts or says anything funny. Baldick, Chris’ view in his *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, that drama is basically for the entertainment of an audience, either on a stage or by means of broadcast (71), goes to consolidate the fact that *mmanwu* performance is indeed, a drama.

**Njokoya Masquerade:**

As has been said earlier in this research, Njokoya is of Umuawulu origin in the like of Atumma masquerade. Like Atumma, women and children are not prohibited from watching Njokoya. The people who constitute his team are human beings and mainly young boys. They beat percussions for him and sing his ditties. Njokoya, having young boys as members of his team, is a clear indication that he is for all. Whenever Njokoya is on the stage performing, people gather to watch and listen to his hilarious, sometimes satiric chants. As he chants, he dances to the delight of his servicing members of the audience who laugh and clap for him. As a gadfly whose responsibility is to use his chant to reform the society, Njokoya nurses no fear in ridiculing any evildoer in the society. In an interview with the carrier of the masquerade, he discloses that Njokoya is a representative of the spirit. Therefore, he should not be afraid to carry out the role of the spirit without fear. According to him, the onus is on him to use his chant to tell evildoers without fear that what they do is evil. In doing so, his aim is not just to ridicule but to use the ridicule to effect positive change and that is why he uses satirical language so that the evildoers would feel the pain and shun evil. On how he gathers the source for his chants, he said that people who are not happy about the perennial ills in the society furnish him with facts. Ordinarily, those who abhor ills and sacriﬁcious acts of the evildoers could not gather the temerity to confront the evildoers, only masquerades like Njokoya could do so.

One remarkable thing about Njokoya is the fact that his chants are spontaneous. Albeit he is furnished with facts about the happenings in the society, he integrates what transpires immediately as he performs in his chants. In other words, he draws his inspirations for his performance from current episodes and from members of his audience. The fact that he is a native of Umuawulu and he also grew up in the town endeared him to the happenings in the town. He knows virtually all the evildoers in the town and when he sights a person among the audience alleged to be sacriﬁcious, Njokoya would, in a hilarious means, mock the person. He would in his chants, criticize the ills of the person while his members (the young boys) respond “*Hmm, Nwa Njokoya!*” The person lampooned feels the pains while the members of the audience who understand the message laugh. Like the literary satire, Njokoya uses laughter as a weapon rather than an end. Among the members of the audience, the unwary ones only laugh and like the saying goes that a fool does not know when the breadfruit firewood was shared, would be ignorant of the message passed by Njokoya because he usually speaks in proverbs.
Features of Drama in Njokoya:

In their *A Handbook to Literature*, William Flint Thrall and Anderson Hibbard quote Aristotle as saying that drama is an imitated human action. To make this point vivid, they quote another scholar, Professor J. M. Manly as disclosing three indispensable elements in drama to include (1) a story (2) told in action (3) by actors who impersonate the characters of the story. The opinion of all scholars is that the hub of drama is action. In their *Literature: an Introduction to Reading and Writing* (1163), Edgar V. Roberts and Henry E. Jacobs observe that drama is all about action and that as the characters perform action, the spectators watch. This entails that in drama, there are characters who perform actions to be watched by the audience. In other words, without the audience, the performers would have no need to perform. To entertain is one of the major roles of drama. Laurence Perrine has made it vivid that a good drama should in addition to the education it offers, also entertains. In the case of Njokoya, there is action. Whenever Njokoya is on the stage, the spectators are thrilled because they anticipate to be entertained by the energetic masquerade. As Njokoya dances, he exhibits actions via his dancing steps and the members of the audience watch with delight. One thing I have observed about Njokoya that thrills his audience is his funny dancing steps as well as his movement. As a comic character, he has a way he walks epping an old man. His walking step alone elicits laughter from the members of his audience. When he dances, exerting acrobatics, people are thrilled to laugh. Njokoya is not facially good looking. He resembles an ugly old man with facial tribal marks like the typical old Igbo man in the primitive Igbo society, and when he walks with his walking stick epping an old man, people look at him and laugh. One would nurse the illusion that as he appears like a very old man that he would not have strength but when he dances, everyone is amazed about the youthful exuberance he demonstrates. He would dance for a while and chase the people around holding his staff as if he would use it on anybody he catches but he was never hostile to his audience. He chases the people simply to excite them and when he chases them, the audience would shout in excitement. People are amazed that soon after Njokoya had chased the people around, they would come back immediately to be thrilled again by the funny masquerade.

As made obvious by Thrall and Anderson, every drama has spectators and without this crucial element of drama, there would obviously be no drama. According to Chris Baldick in his *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, spectators, otherwise referred to as audience is so indispensable in drama that without which, drama becomes void. Similarly, Abrams M. H sees spectator as a crucial element of drama and Laurence Perrine describes spectators as that basic element of literature that distinguishes drama from other genres of literature. It must be vivified at this point that drama and poetry existed in the classical era because their major duty was to delight the teaming spectators irrespective of their literacy status. The Igbo say that one does not dance and admire oneself at the same time. If there is no audience to watch drama, there is definitely no drama. The members of the audience are not mere onlookers, they watch and perform their obligation. As they watch, there is purgation of emotion (carthasis) from the audience. Njokoya performs in occasions like the new yam festival, ofalla and especially at burials to douse high pitched tensions. On each occasion when Njokoya performs, people (audience) cluster to watch. Njokoya is, as a matter of fact, one of the masquerades in Umuawulu and environs that gather overwhelming crowds whenever he plays. The reason for this is because as he dances, he sings and he does not scare people despite the fact that he occasionally chases people around. That he does for the fun of it and the audience derive pleasure when he chases them. He is not interested in catching anybody but he chases them just for the fun of it. As the members of the audience watch, they clap for him when he exhibits certain actions and when he says some funny things as he performs, the members of the audience laugh as well as ponder on what he says. This is one indispensable feature of drama: to entertain as well as to educate the audience. Albeit Njokoya could be vulgrish sometimes, he uses his language to correct ills.

It is a universally acknowledged truth that drama imitates real actions and mirrors the society. In his *Literature: Structure, Sound and Sense*, Laurence Perrine made it glaring that literature, no matter the type, must offer some knowledge in addition to the entertainment that it offers to the audience. According to him, if any form of imaginative literature (drama inclusive), fails to educate him in any way but rather offers only entertainment to him, such a work of art, according to him, is not worth being studied. He describes such imaginative literature as being worthless and likened to ping-pong. In the same vein, Bernard Shaw, a modern critic and author had insisted that dramatic literature should not only delight but also educate. He sees education as the most indispensable function of literature. To him, if drama offers only entertainment without education, the said work of art is worthless and not worth existing. To him, instead drama as an aspect of literature should not offer education, it should rather not offer entertainment. As he clearly puts it, but unless drama offers more than entertainment to him, it seems to him as though he has wasted his evening for nothing. Drama is meant to be watched by the audience and spectators watch for the delight and entertainment that it offers. Good drama offers the two. The submissions of the critics simply consolidate the fact that although the function of literature is to entertain, that of course, is not the primary duty. Bernard Shaw insists that every drama, even comedy;
the dramatic form meant primarily to delight, must as well, educate or it does not qualify as literature. Watching Njokoya is fun but listening to his chants gives more than mere entertainment. It has been said earlier that Njokoya draws his inspiration from what happens around him. It is a fact unadulterated that our contemporary society is marred with profuse social decadence. This is where literature, oral or written, is needed to criticise the social ills because literary writers and performers are simply gadflies. The social ills are therefore, the concern of Njokoya who sees himself as a watchdog in the society whose responsibility is to condemn the social ills pervading the society. He fiercely satirizes the ills thereby condemning them for a better society. Like Atumma Ugonano of Abba who says that he has the licenses to say whatever he wants to say, Njokoya believes that he too, has the license to criticize ills without check. He therefore, never minces words despite his profuse use of proverbs, in criticizing known evil doers in the society.

CONCLUSIONS

Critics from the classical era believe that the joy of drama is its stagability; to them, drama can only be fully appreciated only when it is performed on the stage. Emphasis, therefore, is never that drama must be written. For drama to be acted, critics recommend that it must have characters who appear in certain costumes and whose actions and speeches must delight and educate the members of the audience. This entails that drama is performed before a direct audience without which, definitely, that is not drama. Njokoya possesses all the features of drama. He wears a costume to perform on stage not only to entertain his teaming audience, but as Laurence Perrience recommends, through his language, he also informs and educates the audience so that there would be social reformation. The fact that Njokoya, like other masquerades, has all the elements of the modern drama, the researcher concludes that mmanwu is an indispensable aspect of drama and should not be allowed to go into extinction because we want to epp the Europeans.

REFERENCES