

FACEKUERADE THEATRE AND TECHNICAL AESTHETICS OF EBIRA-  
EKUECHI FESTIVAL IN NIGERIA

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**Abstract**

*Facekuerade* model, propounded by Sunday Enessi Ododo, is a new theatre theory that puzzles theatre scholars within and outside Africa. The *facekuerade* theatre evolved from the customary and conventional masquerade theatre model. It identifies the place of the 'face' and the 'mask' in 'camouflage effect', in African festival theatre, and stands as a challenging theory in contemporary scholarship. An appraisal of Ododo's thesis exemplifies the place of a scholar in his or her society. In reviewing the thesis, this article holds the view that the indigenous theatre aesthetics of the Ebira people is well articulated by Ododo in the *facekuerade* model, a similitude of *Ekur'rahu*'s performance in *Ekuechi* festival. This has illuminated the possibility of expanding, discovering, and theorising new forms of traditional theatre in Nigeria, specifically, and Africa in general. The paper, therefore, suggests that the incorporation of this homemade model into the fold of contemporary theatre helps to cushion the effect of neo-colonialism on African theatre. Other models of this nature, reflective of the factual African theatre and its functionality, should be investigated and encouraged to evolve with a view to filling the vacuum created by the dearth of theories of African theatre.

**Keywords:** Facekuerade, mask, masquerade, festival, technical theatre, performance culture

## Introduction

The hallmark of a doctoral thesis is its contribution to knowledge, particularly in one's own discipline, and towards the general well-being of the society. As Philip Estelle and Pugh Derek (2005) put it in the book *How to get a PhD*.

You are not doing some research for its own sake; you are doing it in order to demonstrate that you are a fully professional researcher, with a good grasp of what is happening in your field and capable of evaluating the impact of new contribution to it – your own as well as others. That is what you get the doctorate for (59).

Ododo attempts to improve the general well-being of the Ebira people through his research, and to add to the existing literature on Ebira theatre. Through his thesis, he identifies the theatrical elements in *Ekuechi* festival and theorises a new theatre paradigm from an African theatre festival performance. Thus, he addresses Lekan Oyegoke's (2006) conclusion to the effect that

the transnational, continental and intercontinental cultural spaces of African writing seem to be under attack by post-colonialism which, is effectively a theory of pre-colonial, colonial, neo-colonial and post-colonial cultural productions (in Ogunba, 11-12).

Sunday Enessi Ododo's (2004) thesis is an attempt to challenge post-colonial theories on theatre productions, particularly, the masquerade theatre, using the Ebira Festival of his own society as paradigm. In this way, he corroborates Oyin Ogunba's salient observation as follows:

Just imagine how much one gets to know about the Igbo people by reading Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* or *Arrow of God*, or about Indians by going through R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*, or about the now seemingly insoluble India/Pakistan conflict by reading Khushwant



Singh's *Train to Pakistan* or about the ordinary life of Trinidadians by going through Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur*. In each case, the details of the life and thought of the people are laid out in a palatable manner. No philosophical, sociological or political treatise can teach one so well as a good creative piece. (11)

Thus, Ododo's thesis is not just an intellectual piece, but an expository research into the life and worldview of the Ebira society. As a theatre scholar, he feels compelled to take something from his people and give to theatre and the academic world in general. The *facekuerade* model did not evolve over-night, but from a careful study of the Ebira masquerade practice over time. For instance, Ododo, after a careful observation of the *Ekuechi* festival, points out that

The star masquerade performer at *Ekuechi* festival, *Ekur'rahu* (night singing masquerade), does not wear a mask as well as *Akatapa* (Jester) and *Ekur'ahete* (feet stamping masquerade). The *Ekur'echichi* (rubbish heap masquerade) and *Ekur'Okise* (soothsaying masquerade) that perform during the day fully masked in *Echane* festival also participate in *Ekuechi* maskless festival...this is precisely what has informed our own term and concept of 'Facekuerade'. The words Face, Masquerade and *Ekuechi*, all contribute to the formation of the Face – Eku – rade...facekuerade therefore refers to a performance masquerade character without mask (391-392).

From a close assessment of the Ebira *Ekuechi* festival, Ododo (2004) developed for the theatre a new performance model, analysed in this article.

### **An Overview of the Thesis**

The thesis adopted the primary and secondary sources of information for its data collection, under the joint supervision of Olu Obafemi and Samson O. O. Amali. As observed in Christopher Ugolo's thesis on "Hubert Ogunde's National Choreographic style", in which he asserts the

need to have a Nigerian choreographic style to unite the Nigerian citizens (2). Ododo's theory on *Facekuerade* performance model is geared towards refocusing the masquerade theatre in Nigeria and elsewhere with a modification of an existing African theatre concept. This will be fully explained through the thesis analysis, which is structured in the following order: From Masquerade to *Facekuerade*: A Transition; the Nigerian Theatrical/Performance Traditions; the Ebira and *Ekuechi Facekuerade* Performance; the Playing and Technical Aesthetics of *Ekuechi Facekuerade* Ensemble and *Facekuerade* Theatre; and, A Performance Theory and Model.

### **From Masquerade to *Facekuerade*: A Transition**

Masquerade practice is an art. It is an important cultural event in Africa which, according to Ododo, is "perceived as an entity that embodies the spirit of the ancestors" (18), the gods and spirit beings. Although, the West by definition simply see it as a form of disguise through the use of mask, to the Africans it is a significant part of the "cycle of life", the bond between the living and the dead and the unborn and a link to the "extra-mundane universe". In Nigeria, masquerade performance is a cultural and religious event among the Igbo, Yoruba and many other tribes. As Suru Damisa (2010) puts it "masquerade art is not new to the Africans; it is prominent in most cultures as an aspect of their festivals and as a means of communication, information, education and entertainment" (1). In Ododo's thesis, however, a particular reference is made to the Ebira *Ekuechi* masquerade performance from where the *facekuerade* transition is identified. According to Ododo (2004) "there are some performance characters without masks that are still perceived as masquerades in Nigeria" (19). Through his research, however, he discovered that in many societies, some masquerades do not use mask. For example, Ololu of Ibadan, Jenju of Abeokuta, Okelekele of Ekinrin-Ade, Melemuku of Oyo town, Ayaka in Iboland, Ogbugburu of Ososo in Akoko Edo area of Edo State, to mention but a few (20-21). Based on



these findings, he states that "we believe that the use of the term masquerade for a performer without a mask has to be revisited" (21). To revisit the term, he came up with a new concept 'Facekuerade'. The transition is obvious in the character representation via the use of mask. Thus, he states that with the mask it is *mask-querade* but without the mask it is *face-kuerade*, suggestive of a bare face.

### **The Nigerian Theatrical/Performance Traditions**

To foreground and position the *facekuerade* concept as a new theatre model, Sunday Ododo takes a look at the attempts made by several scholars to evolve concepts that have become functional in the theatre today. Some of the conventions include Naturalism, Realism, Brecht's Epic theatre, the Avant-garde, Synthetic theatre, Theatre of cruelty, Poor theatre and so on. He further explains to us the various trends in modern theatre development forms in Nigeria, such as Folk Theatre, Popular Theatre, Ritual Theatre, Marketplace Theatre, Restorative Theatre, Theatre for Development (TFD) and so on. Added to these examples is the *Facekuerade*.

Folk theatre is used to advance the Yoruba 'folk opera' and the cultural resources of the Yoruba. For example, it is used to project the contributions of the Alarinjo theatre tradition to theatre development in Nigeria (31). Ritual Theatre expresses the phenomenon of man's interaction with nature which informs "rituals and festivities for spiritual and mental respite." This theatre form mirrors the life of the community in trading, farming, and social governance and so on, and emphasises the role of indigenous worship rituals in these activities, usually through plays. Playwrights like Wole Soyinka and J. P. Clark, as well as critics like Ebun Clark and Oyin Ogunba among others, have underlined the significance of ritual and worship in the African life, through their literary and critical works. Ododo's *facekuerade* theatre highlights an existing theatre form, particularly, among the people of Ebira Tao, and thus adds to the traditional theatre forms in Nigeria, in the conscious search for a national theatre.

### **The Ebira and Ekuechi Facekuerade Performance**

Ebira is central to *facekuerade* practice. Ebiraland is surrounded by tribes like the Yoruba, Ososo and Igala where masquerade/*facekuerade* practice is pronounced. This location, as Ododo puts it, is more than a physical territory; it is also a metaphysical or mystical entity capable of having an effect on the people's lives and receiving their sacrifices. Ebira's origin is traceable to several places, but the *agidigbo* is one of other clues that can be used to trace the origin of the Ebira vis-à-vis their ancestral worship. The *agidigbo*, a musical instrument, has a familiar tune translatable into "*Idoko Voza, Idoko Veku.*" "*Idoko* is human and also ancestral (masquerade)". This sound, according to Ododo, constantly reminds the Ebira Tao, Igu, Mozum Opanda, Oje, Agatu and Etuno that they are descendants of Idoko, the third Atta of Idah town, in the present day Kogi State, where masquerade performance is dominant.

The Ebira worldview, in regard to life's cycle, necessitates the constant visits of the ancestors in masquerade form. They frown at injustice among the populace because they are peace loving. In actual fact, the word '*ebira*' stands for 'peace'. Thus, the masquerades usually visit to unite the people. This is also borne out by the Ebira's philosophy of life. The unborn, the living and the dead are constantly united in every traditional activity, whereby the dead as ancestors watch over the living. This is because the living is the door or outlet for the newly born from the ancestral world to come to this world. According to Ododo (2007), the dead transmigrate into the land of the living through the *Ekuechi facekuerade* that features in the *Ekuechi* festival. During the festival, they move from home to home, admonishing, warning, taking requests and blessing the people. The Ebira believe in the spirits, (*Ori*) and God the Almighty (*Ohomorih*), and *Ekuechi* (Masquerade). The *Ekuechi* phenomenon is the epicentre of Ebira culture.



### The Playing and Technical Aesthetics of *Ekuechi Facekuerade* Ensemble

*Ekuechi* is seen as theatre that represents the very existence of the Ebiraland people. It is a theatre because it possesses some aesthetic theatrical elements. Therefore, the performance and technical aesthetics of the Festival is considered here by Ododo. The elements share similarities with the Western model but differ through the conventions of utilisation. The difference, for example, as Ododo points out, could be noticed in the lighting and costume usage. Like the Tiv Kwagh-hir, the *Ekuechi facekuerade* theatre is an indigenous theatre with unique performance style. This uniqueness is identified in the significant use of peculiar icons, codes and spoken conventions. Furthermore, there are the technical positions of accessories – *Ekuechi* uses *Izenyin* and *Ireha* for music production, stenography, lighting, make-up and so on in the ensemble.

The availability of space allows for playing aesthetics. The space is vital because it creates an avenue for the players to showcase their talents through the various arts of singing, dancing and dramatisation which have aesthetic value. Ododo further points out that “space scarcely manifests ideas on its own other than that ascribed to it by the people” (153). He affirms that human beings generate ideas to rule space or relate with it. The aesthetics of staging or playing is demonstrated in the mass dance movements in which processions and booth staging are involved. Movement starts from the home of the custodian to the *Ori* shrine through to the village/market square (*Orere*) and also to the neighbourhood and back to *Idoji* after the grand finale. As performances are going on in the booth stage, people sit on rooftops, upstairs and trees and this sitting arrangement adds to the visual aesthetic impact. Music, songs, and invocative voice form a part in the playing and technical arrangement. Apart from their socio-political significance to the people, they facilitate communal participation and the beauty recorded from this group and communal responsibility is in the area of call and response and variation in rhythm generation. Added to the above are decorated musical instruments; props, costumes and accessories. For example,

*ugogoyin* (talking drum) is decorated with balls (*izenyin*) so also is the *facekuerade* (*Ekur'rahu*) costume. Ododo concludes here that the Facekuerade performances are artistically vibrant and technically compelling. With *Ekur'rahu* as the chief actor and other participant members as actors of *Ekuechi* cast, the festival always has an overall aesthetic outlook.

### **Facekuerade Theatre: Performance Theory and Model**

In proposing a new performance model in the 'Facekuerade Theatre', the "theory is advanced using the transformational process of 'self' in Ebira 'masking' tradition", that is, the *Ekur* and *Ekur'rahu* performances, the former being masked and the latter unmasked. This theory considers the place of man in the world of the living and the dead as provided for in the Ebira culture. The dead (*an'eku*) and the living (*an'eche*) meet through the masquerade (*Ekur*). This link as Ododo expatiates "is determined by the 'self' in temporal existence and dissolution of the being as *Okur* ...but moved to *Ekur*" (237-238).

The 'self' can transform into a dual existence using creative and re-creative forces as being experienced in the theatre. It is further posited that in most masquerade festivals, for example in the *Ekuechi*, the living and spirit beings intermingle. It is conceivable, therefore, that during the masquerading activities, the *Ekur* as masked performer and physical manifestation of the domain of the dead, interacts with *Ehe* (domain of the living), whereby the living, who is transformed spiritually as a metaphysical entity, appears in 'facekuerade model'. Thus the living essence and the dead essence meet at the realm of *facekuerade* essence. Ododo hence adds that once one transmigrates into *Ekur* one transforms into an ancestral figure (*ohiku*), and that through this exchange, a constant flow of interaction is ensured.

This is demonstrated in the performance of the *Ekur'rahu*. With the absence of only the mask, and possessed by the ancestors, he performs exceptionally and beyond ordinary human capacity. The



*Facekuerade* performance model is therefore a combination of the *Face* – symbolised by the absence of mask, *Ekú* – the domain of the dead, and *Rade* (raid) – the action of ‘raiding’ the community with warnings, sanctions, healing, renewal and prophetic utterances backed by powers from the *Ekú*. The dual role of the performer is visible in the theatre whereby the actor takes on the personality of another in a performance, while still retaining his identity. Thus, the technicality and performance model of the *facekuerade* finds itself in the genre of the modern theatre form.

### Conclusion

Ododo’s thesis has popularised the indigenous theatre form within the context of modern theatre practice and stimulated a paradigm shift from the known masquerade performance model to a new model called *facekuerade* theatre. The technical and performance aesthetics of *Ekuechi* festival are here advanced to situate the *facekuerade* concept as a major contribution to the development of the traditional theatre vis-à-vis the imposition of the Western theatre culture. In his thesis, Ododo makes the following salient observations: one, that the mask in masquerading is more than physical; that is, it includes “darkness, voice, disguise, pseudonyms and fear”; two, that the Nigerian experimental theatre today shares similarities in the use of language, festival and narrative theatre forms, but that the masquerade aesthetic format in Nigeria has not received definitive expression; three, that *Ekuechi* shares some aesthetic similarities with the Western model, but with some unique characteristic features; four, that the *Ekú’rahu*, the protagonist in the festival, has his action guided by the Ebira worldview; five, that space is an organisational factor in the festival; six, that the technical thrust of the festival is both functionally and aesthetically significant; and, finally, that the ancient art form of *Ekuechi* has found a new ground via this study in the contemporary theatrical and performance tradition.

The resourcefulness of the indigenous theatre aesthetics has been well articulated. What remains is the incorporation of these models into the fold of contemporary theatre. Ododo’s *facekuerade* model, a

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similitude of Eku'rahu's performance in Ekuechi festival, has illuminated the possibility of expanding, discovering, and theorising new forms of traditional African theatre.

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