

Ecstatic Performance, An African Theatre Of Sublime

F. U. Egwuda-Ugbeda

Senior Lecturer

Department of Theatre and Film Studies

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract:

In this paper, attempt is made to make a critical view of ecstatic performance as a theatre form. Also, there is a critical analysis of the possession state of an ecstatic dancer that is, the brains behind ecstasy and possession, and whether ecstasy and possession are mere fallacy. Also, the paper seeks to discern the theatrical elements that are inherent in such African performance of sublime. Ecstatic performance is the first state of possession. The performance consumes or catapults the performers from their state of being and lodges them into a spiritual realm. Theatre is a conglomeration or a synthesis of all facets of art form, it transcends human activities and a place where all human endeavours including the spirit essence are highlighted, re-enacted and woven together as a unit. This study has its premise on “Iya ebo” or the performance of the deities among the Igala. It is indeed, out to establish the relationship between the mortal and the immortal worlds among Igala people.

Introduction:

Igala is a people and the language spoken by the people. The people occupy the eastern flank of the River Niger. Igala is the largest ethnic group in Kogi State. The people believe in life after death. This means that they have a great reverence for the spirits, the spirit world, the ancestors, deities and spirit essence. The Igala equally believe in life after death that is, one is not just a waste after death like lower animals. When an adult dies, he joins his ancestors and later he may decide to come back to the world again by being born to one of his relations through the process or reincarnation. Also such ancestors can decide to come back to the earth through masquerade. J.S. Boston highlights this vicious cycle of one's existence thus, –a man's relationship with his

guardian spirit and with the other ancestors expresses the notion that his destiny is not entirely of his own making but it is determined partly by forces beyond his control||. He states further that, –in Igala religion, the person’s destiny in this world is believed to depend upon a choice made in the presence of the creator (Ojo), in the spirit world before the person was born||. (1977:33).

This belief serves as a panacea to Igala performances through their music, dance, ceremony and festival. Every social or spiritual event has its strong base on the people’s cosmology and view of the world.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines ecstasy among others as, –... a religion state in which the soul is to leave the body and be united with God ...|| In this regard, ecstasy is a state of possession, which results to one leaving his natural state into a spiritual realm as a result of the body, which has been imbued with spirit and spirit essence.

Osterly believes that ecstatic state is the outcome of strong religious emotion, which necessitates some bodily expressions and may be parallel with the exuberance of one’s physical health, which may demand vigorous exercise|| (1923: 102). In this vein, ecstasy is a function of the loss of the self-control as an individual is catapulted from the natural to the supernatural and from the moral to the immoral state.

Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary defines sublime among other things as, –set aloft, lifted on high, exalted, lofty, majestic, elate, blindly supercilious supreme of the highest of noblest nature, awakening feelings of awe and veneration, just under the skin that which is sublime the lofty or grand in thought or style, the supreme degree to raise a loft, to exalt, to transmit into something higher, etc.||

In view of the above, the concept of African theatre of sublime is borne out of a tripartite level of communications. Such areas of communications are, performers/performers, performers/audience and performers/supernatural beings.

Dance, particularly African dance form is a rich, formidable, sustainable and enduring art form. A typical African dance is loaded with all facets of art forms. In such dance, there is a manifestation of drama, history, geography, fine art, music etc. Dance is a way of life of the people of Africa as it is not just meant for entertainment but also deeply rooted in people’s culture, their cosmology and their worldview. It is an established fact that, Africans dance for joy, they dance for sorrow, they dance to avert calamity, they dance to sustain the seasons,

the people's well-being and the people's relationship with their guardian spirits, ancestors and deities. In this premise, dance is a very rich language of the people. What I mean is dance, is the unspeakable language of the people such language can easily be understood by other related cultures both far and near. African dance is a demonstration of life, life on earth and life after death. A typical African dance has every instrument that can easily pass it as a complete theatre form.

. In every circumstance of the life of the African is a reenactment of action or a demonstration of life itself. This is made manifest in their occupational lives, in war, in religion, in festival, ritual and rites, in marriage, in jubilation, at death, at the birth of a child and in every other social and sacred circumstance.

Iya Ebo Performance:

In Igala, every dance is a demonstration of a particular circumstance, which has affected the lives of the people. It could be circumstance of war, occupational circumstance, an act of religion worship etc.

Iya-ebo (dance for the deities) is also known in some quarters as *Iya Ikpakachi* or *Iya Alijenu*. *Iya ebo* is a sacred dance, which emanates as a result of religious euphony. It is a mini-festival for the spirits and deities alike. It is such festival, which calls for the congregation of both mortal and immortal beings.

Iya ebo is a sacred dance which takes a different form from other dances particularly social performances. In Igala, sacred dance is meant for religion purpose such as ritual, rites and burial ceremonies. *Iya ebo* has an efficacy of strong religious attribute. It is one of the dances in Igala culture, which is characterized by ecstasy. It is imbued with possession. This type of possession is not a mere excitement, or exhilaration. Exhilaration can take place in every dance be it traditional or modern dance form. Exhilaration is simply an exhibition of excitement, which causes the dancer to repress his problems out of joy or enjoyment. Ecstatic dance is a holy dance, which is believed to be imbued with spirit essence, and which has the capacity to catapult or lift the individual to astral journey. As the possession takes place the individual's spirit now communes with other spirits in the spirit realm.

. The subject of *Iya ebo* as an ecstatic performance shall be viewed from the perspectives of religion and drama. *Iya ebo* performance is viewed as one of the few occasions when the living and the dead share a common communication outlet. In such vein, Osterly gives reasons for religious or ecstatic performance by stating;

Sacred or (ecstatic) performance is meant to honour the supernatural power, to be in union with supernatural being, dancing until one becomes unconscious so that the body is made a fit and a temporary abode for the gods, to induce the god to make crops grow, to help the sun run its course, to hallow or consecrate a victim for sacrifice, it serves as an act of homage to the gods who are present during the ceremony, it assists the warriors gain victory on battle field, it equally, serves as marriage or mourning rite etc (1923:203).

In another point of view Jankovic remarks, –most ecstatic dances epitomize the dramatic elements of various rituals and actions with significant ritual-magic actions|| (1934: 13). In the same vein Combel observes, –the spoken mythological beliefs and dance drama are the elements of ecstatic dance|| (1946: 31).

Iya ebo performance is not a national festival neither is it a community activity, but an individual who feels he has a stake with his guardian deity or spirit can host the performance. In a traditional Igala community, every individual has a guardian deity known as –*Ebo Ojii*” and a particular ancestral spirit who serves as a personal god or *Ojo* who is believed to have reincarnated the individual. Sometimes the individual comes all out to honour or reverence his totem or *Alijenu* which in most cases leads to a performance that would embrace a large audience.

In Igala, there are two forms of deities, those that are owned by a large community and those that are owned by individuals. Both the community owned deities and the individual owned deities have chief priests who are appointed with the consent of the community or the deity in question as is determined by the pronouncement of the *Ifa* oracle. There is no grand preparation for the *Iya ebo* performance. On the day in question, items for the celebration are brought in, that is, to the shrine or the sacred groove. There are no special invitations for the performance as everybody within the vicinity who is disposed to the celebration is found there. Foods and drinks are dedicated to the deity or the spirit in question. The items of food and drinks are shared among the worshippers

In the process, the good spirits are invoked and invited to share the items of foods and drinks while the purported are told or rather warned never to come close to the vicinity. When the food consumption is over, a message of goodwill is passed round for

individuals and the community generally. The eating and drinking takes the first phase of the festival.

The second stage of the festival is the music and dance. There are no designated instrumentalists or dancers for this occasion. Anybody who has the impetus among the worshippers can take up the instruments and play on. The musical instruments are big drums, two small drums, *Iye Uba* and *Oma Uba*, metal gongs and rattles. The vocal music is such that can invoke the spirits who have already been conjured by the chief of *Atama*.

The music starts with low tempo with an accompaniment of melodious songs, which lyrics hinges on the propitiating and thanking the deities in question. Everybody present is a potential dancer depending on one's stake with the spirits present. As the music goes frenzy, dancers began to emerge. Sometimes a passerby who never knew of such festival could be captivated by the spirit of the music and dances in.

Iya ebo dance has no specified form. It is not organized in an orchestrated form. Every individual who is in the league or at liberty with the spirit is induced into dancing. It is a spirit induced form of dance/performance. The individual's dance steps, dance movement, body manipulation, gestures and all forms of expressions are dictated by the abiding spirit. Because, the dance is spirit induced, it becomes a spontaneous act.

As the dancer gets up from his seat or dances from the road or from the neighborhood, he is in a state of possession. His dance behavior is wild and unstrained. His utterances are punchy, hard and sometimes difficult to discern. Such utterances are in most cases prophetic. The dancer sometimes falls down and rolls on the ground. Sometimes, they jump and even attempt to fly. As they dance along, strange things continues to happen, such things are sometimes viewed as metaphysical. A woman may appear with a big basin or a pot of water on her head without a hand support, as she dances she goes frenzy without the basin of water falling, the water spilling or the pot falling or breaking. In some cases, a dancer will carry an ember of fire on her bare hands without getting scalded or burnt. As the performance progresses a dancer may appear with some particles of broken bottles and begins to chew. In all cases, everyone that comes out in the performance arena is in a state of possession and transformation as the body and soul are lost to the spirit. At the climax of the possessive state, there arises a communication gap between the possessed or ecstatic dancers and other human beings who have not gone into such

state. The ecstatic dancers seem to stand in the gap between the living and the dead for the welfare or well being of the individual and the community in general. This fact is better explained by the following dance researchers on dance as they observe: England reports, –the preliminary stages of ecstatic dance are formal and secular, and that during the main part of the dance, the medicine man’s potential to become religiously possessed is ever present|| (1966: 51). In the same vein Osterly enunciates; sacred dance is used to induce dissociated states of consciousness which are invested with religious significance and value, as techniques of divination and healing|| (1966:35). In his own view, Middleton asserts –dance could be considered as an outlet for expression of certain psychological states and that is, as a form of drama for watching audience, as a means of entering communications with spirits by becoming possessed, and as a way of enjoying the sense of one’s own physical movements irrespective of whether one is being watched or not||, (1985:31). Making the same observation, Ijeomah is of the opinion that, –sacred dance disintegrates the inhibition of the flesh and arouses the inner emotions that transcends the earthly considerations... such dance elevates our consciousness either in praise of the sacred kings, the overtures, or in supplication for some desires|| (1986:28).]

Earlier, Osterly has enumerated reasons for ecstatic dance stating that, sacred dance makes the body a temporary abode of deity or spirit and such is utilized at that moment for divine purposes which is the case with *Iya ebo* ecstatic dance form.

The theatrical aspect of the phenomenal African theatre form is not less imbued and less directed by the spirit and spirit essence. The performance arena is in a sacred groove or a shrine where the presence of the spirits are made manifest even though not every mortal being beholds their presence. Shrine and sacred groove are the abode of deities or ancestral spirits. Such environments are usually held in awe with an unflinching reverence as they serve as umbilical cord between the land of the living and the land spirits. The congregation usually sits in a semi-circular formation a little bit distant from the shrine. This arrangement is such that has the mortal beings sit in a semi-circular formation, the spirits sit in the other side thereby forming a complete circle while the performance is done in the center of the circle. It is a typical African arena theatre or theatre in the round. The instrumentalists sit together with the congregation while the chief priest sits aloof, in most cases, the chief priest shares same apartment with the

deity. The arena stage is wide enough to accommodate the ecstatic dancers with all their movement and body manipulation.

The dialogue, which is rendered in form of recitation, chant, incantations, invocation and song first of all, comes from the chief priest. The other form of dialogue comes from the dancers while in trance as they prophesy and make all forms of noises. This sacred or metaphysical dialogue is between the chief priest/ spirit and chief priest/ the congregation. The other level of dialogue comes from the singers and instrumentalist. The lyrics of the songs are clear and the messages are passed down to the spirit, the chief priest and the congregation. The last level of communication or dialogue is between the ecstatic dancers/ the spirits, which is further decoded to the congregation. These messages are not passed across just to entertain, sensitive and conscientize as is the case with the Western theatre form, but to enhance the welfare of the people via good health, prosperity and long life.

The costume, which is leitmotiv, is meant to delineate the character or personality of the chief priest from the congregation. It is only the chief priest or *Atama* who wears such designated costume. The costume is a hand-woven or locally made calico, which is known by Igala as *Okpe*. The costume is both white and red in colour, white signifies purity while red connotes debacle, turmoil and prodigy. These conflicting colours emphasize the extent of prodigy and debacle on one hand, and peace in *Iya ebo* performance.

The power to explain the essence of African theatre of sublime lies in one's deep understanding of the cosmos, which lays guardian to the Igala and Igala culture. Sometimes such apocalypse is made manifest through the *Atama* or the chief priest. The chief priest is usually vested with such metaphysical power as to explain or discern the prodigy that characterizes the ecstatic performance.

Like *Iya ebo* performance, Barnes says of *Ogun* dance of Yoruba as, –an integral part of African ritual theatre, which addressing metaphysical beings or powers is a poetic, non-verbal and verbal expression which is continually created and re-created by countless performers and interpreters over generations... || (1989:1020).

It must be recorded that in its formulation of time, space and dynamics, dance transmits a people's philosophy, values and thoughts, which are embodied in human action. As a primary vehicle for communicating with the spirit realm, it is an instrument of the gods through which they communicate with the phenomenal world. In such

view, ecstatic dance is an essay on the nature and quality of metaphysical force actualized in phenomenal world.

Like any other culture in Africa, Igala people have the desires to reach to the Almighty (*Ojo*) through the lesser gods or deities (*ebo*). *Ebo* serves as a bridge between the Igala and the Almighty God (*Ojo*). Apart from *ebo*, the Igala believe in other spirit such as, ancestral spirits, *Ogwu* spirit, spirits of the forest (*Alijenu*), water spirits, and etc. The greatest manifestation of the world of the spirits among the mortal world is in the performance. There are a series of performance, such as ritual activities, rites, adorations and above all music and dance. *Iya ebo*, which simply means, a dance of the deities is meant to bring the deities close to the mortal beings through the act of ecstasy and possession. *Iya ebo* belongs to the class of thaumaturgy in Igala, and the essence of such performance is for veneration. Anyone who may participate in *Iya ebo* performance must be pure as that is the criteria that may lead one into a state of ecstasy and possession. The state of possession catapults one into a higher state among the mortals.

In a nutshell, African theatre of sublime belongs to the class of thaumaturgy. It entertains, informs, sensitizes, conscientises, stimulates and enhances the people's cosmology and view of the world. It is indeed a benediction to the people of Igala in particular and African in general.

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