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SYMBOLISING GERONTOCRACY IN THE COSTUME OF *AKPAN EKPO* OF IKPE ANNANG PEOPLE OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The discourse of leadership capacity between the aged and the younger age brackets continues to raise much concern, especially as confidence in both is critical, following the current unproductivity in the nation which has been attributed largely to poor leadership. Nigeria presents a state that, over the decades, have been governed by the elites who are largely of the aged class. Such situation triggers down to the lower level in the rural communities and of such play out in traditional performances in which roles are almost predetermined or defined as far as leadership issues are concerned in artistic performances. This paper uses qualitative approach towards a critical interrogation of the costume elements of Akpan Ekpo of the Ikpe Annang people. The study is undertaken in the bid to examine its symbolic category towards situating aspects of gerontocracy in the identified cultural society. Findings show that Ekpo performance is operated under fundamental rules based on the shared role model of leadership with its restrictive customs and values in membership activities. A significant aspect of the performance dwells on the personality of Akpan Ekpo as the symbol of honour for the older, the experienced and the wise as conceptualized in the loftiness of its costume. Findings further show that the nnuk-ita, (three horns) the eruat (spear) ,the adadat-anyenkeed (one red eye), and the ikwa(machete)which the masquerade is costumed in, inform the cosmic view of the Ikpe Annang people that leadership lies in experience rather than agility. The paper concludes that an orderly society should transit power from the older to the younger to set an orderly progression in the transition code of the society as portrayed in Akpan Ekpo through its body accessories.

Keywords: Symbols, Gerontocracy, Costume, Akpan Ekpo, Ikpe Annang People.

Introduction

Traditional performances in Nigeria basically draw their design outlay from their view of the social strata which much emphasis is placed on the order of birth, respect for age and the sublime of virtue from the accumulation of knowledge overtime. Such reliance on the accumulated knowledge shades serve to perpetuate and accentuate knowledge system in society which David Hume explains as arriving at ideas "by the sense and experience" (Chris Akpan201). A remarkable one is the *Ekpo* Ikpe Annang masquerade configuration and their creative representation of the Ibibio/Annang idiom: "old broom sweeps neater" (Johnson 19). Such plays fall into the corpus of ethno-dramatic artistry of which artistic work, as agreed by David Udoinwang and Monica Udoette, seeks "… foregrounding their artistic vision on the ethno-cultural pre-texts" (171), based on the society that produces the literary work.

Ekpo Ikpe Annang is one of the unique traditional structures in the performance of *Ekpo* masquerade in Akwa Ibom State. Ikpe Annang is in Essien Udim of Akwa Ibom State in Nigeria. In the state generally, *Ekpo* is one of the performances venerated as an indigenous spiritual and political culture passed downfrom the forebears of the society to the progeny. In Ikpe Annang, quite as other clans in Akwa Ibom State, *Ekpo* masquerade is an annual performance which the system of human categorizationin the natural order of persons in the society such as the mother, son, daughter, teacher, cripple, etc, are practically represented, and their manners and peculiarities are conceptualized to have evolved from the spiritual realm to the physical abode.

Ekpo is a traditional institution fully developed in the socio-cultural and religious configuration that arranges the personalities into types to portray spirit beings or the ancestral lineages in the order of human and supernatural relationships. That may be the reason *Ekpo* is revered as an institution people are initiated into and also where the initiates people express their creativity through performances in the various crafts that situate the name, status and identity each masquerade is named based on how they appear. Thus, the masquerades in this view, refers to a segment of social standing, or as Inih Ebong puts it in the sense as,

> …categories of spirits and cosmological forces in various existential planes that become incarnated in theatrical forms as masquerades. However, the dramas (are) cast on periodic incarnation of the community tutelary spirit and cosmological guardians in various forms and sizes, with a background accompaniment of appropriate chant, rites and music supported by professional cantors, ritual experts and component traditional orchestras. These dramatic scenes exhibited the virtues and ideals of vestal innocence, premarital chastity, love, devotion, loyalty, respect and industry (Asuquo Edem, 46)

As Ebong spreads the *Ekpo* background as seen above, a significant aspect is acknowledged in the promotion of social order through categorization of the masqueradepantheon into allegorical personalities in which the prominence of the aged or the knowledgeable is highlightedin every performance and this aptly demonstrates the milieu of gerontocracy as part of essential credo of Ekpo tradition in society.

According to Itoro Etim, the people of Ikpe Annang shape their *Ekpo* masquerades into *Akpan Ekpo* (first born), *Eka Ekpo* (mother of spirit), *Inyoon Ekpo* (the cripple spirit), *Nyama Ekpo* (the carpet grass spirit), and *Akama Ikpo Ekpo* (the rope controller spirit or the wild one or warrior spirit). All these masquerades represent some historical concept in Ikpe Annang idea of masquerading; they also represent the various social class coded in somedecipherable cultural values in the society. Among the values, a significant one is the honour and regard for birthright in the veneration of *Akpan Ekpo* via his costume (76-77). Akpan means firstborn. This gives the impression that the governance of the aged or the control of power by the older in respect and response of the younger is the stranglehold to actualize leadership in the society. Against this backdrop, this paper takes a critical look into the costume design of *Akpan Ekpo* of Ikpe Annang people, the extent to which the "Akpanness" of the *Ekpo* conceptualizes gerontocracy in the society, and how these concepts are symbolized in the masquerade pantheon of role-model and power hegemony.

Theoretical framework

The foundation of this work is based on mythological/archetypal theory. Archetypal criticism can be linked to Carl Jung and Northrop Frye. The theory was fully developed into mythological/archetypal instrument for unraveling a text or performance by Frye in his book*Anatomy of Criticism,* published in 1957. According to Charles Bressler, the major linkage of Jung to their theory is his idea of the "human consciousness, the psyche that houses the cumulative knowledge, experiences and images of the entire human species… these memories exist as the form of archetypes: pattern or images of repeated human experience" (127). The idea of *Ekpo Ikpe* Annang orchestrating their masquerades to emulate the ancient pattern of apportioning leadership role in the human realm based on age is an attempt to streamline the past and present conception of the orderly society brought alive from the recesses of the universality of myth in the society. Hence, "Frye borrows Jung's idea about myths and archetypes and develops a systematic approach to archetypal or mythical criticism … (he) maintains that they exist and overall structure or mythic development that can explain the structure and significance of a text (performance)" (Bressler, 128).

The tenet of this theory is to link the specific social experience and structure to a universal outlook domiciled in the mind as a collective consciousness across the structure of human society through performance. For instance, every performance mirrors a thing outside itself. It may be a person, a people or an idea brought to a repeated practice. According to Peter Widdowson and Selden Raman:

> It is with the relationship of literary art to some very deep chord in human nature that mythology criticism deals. The myth critics is concerned to seek out those mysterious artifacts built into certain literary forms which elicit with almost uncanny force, dramatic and universal human reactions … To discover how it is that certain works of literature (cultural performance) … image a kind of reality to which readers give perennial response …, what psychoanalysis attempts to disclose about the individual personality, the study of myth reveals about the mind and character of a people (116).

Relating this theory to the paper, the structure of *Ekpo* Ikpe Annang has been configured in the heritage of the people since time. The structure recognizes categories of men in the society and establishes this categorization through the costume that these personalities put on during performance. Therefore, the understanding of the *Ekpo*'s organizational structure requires some knowledge of the ancient society which was practically communal. In such society, such proverbs like "*Eka-abomagwoituahaajedinombiomo* (An elder does not cry because of the weight of the load he carries)" (Ebewo 98), is very common in the Annang society. Such proverb equates leadership role, intellectual prowess and moral insight to the mettle of the elders or aged.

***Ekpo* Ikpe Annang: An Overview**

The *Ekpo* masquerade of the Ikpe Annang people is an ancient cultural organization that is performed annually in the community. According to Etim *et al*, "the practice is limited to only males, specially, those imitated into the mystery of the cult… Ekpo denotes spirits of the people who have died, the ancestors" (409). However, Ekong Ekong acknowledges *Ekpo* society as a traditional society whose activities have bearing with the political concern and order of the society in his statement that in Akwa Ibom State generally, especially the Annang axis, "those formal social groups whose primary functions touched upon the political as well

as the religious life of the people… prominent among those whose functions were mainly governmental or political, were *Ekpo* and *Ekong* societies"(142). To this effect, being a member of *Ekpo* cultural society and performance organization or not, the significant factor the audience uses to identify one *Ekpo* from the other is the costume. This makes the body accessories of *Ekpo* masquerade of Ikpe Annang the major archetypal component that reoccurs as a tool for personality appropriation among the Ekpo masquerades to this day.

Actually, every sect, community or group usually parades numerous masquerades, and each of the *Ekpo* has a distinguishable name, possibly with a distinguishable role to the society. According to Edet Udo, in the pre-colonial society of Akwa Ibom State, "*Ekpo Onyoho* was the principle law enforcement agent" (52). Along the line, Ekong mentions other kinds of *Ekpo* to include, *Ukpa Ubugo Ekpo* (ghost of the dead), *Ekpondemisong* (the spirit of the earth's deity) and *Ekpo Nyoho* (masquerade)". All these *Ekpo* are known and identified by what they put on to carry out their social responsibility. On the personalities of Ekpo Ikpe Annang precisely, Etim *et al* posits:

> Costume defines a people's perception of reality in their traditional performances… these are costumes that are central to the overall definition of a masquerade in a committee of its kind. This is quite important in a society like the Annang where each *Ekpo* persona is named after a human type like *Akpan* (first son), *Eka* (mother), *Inyoon* (cripple), *A-titia* (teacher), and so on. It is inoperative therefore, that some costumes are necessary in terms of beautification, concealment and embellishment; but there is a costume that captures the depth and reality of a masquerade. (405)

The denotation which is general is noticeable in the body accessories of *Akpan Ekpo*; yet, additional information that requires both cultural insight and academic depth to decipher is imperative from the archetypal configuration. Such information is the use of costume to situate the rule, the veneration and the prominence of the "first born" (gerontocracy) in the society.

Gerontocracy in View

Gerontocracy in this contexts is the government or leadership practice concentrated on the order of birth, not actually the aged. However, for the fact that whoever was born before another is older them the latter, the term gerontocracy is used to describe leadership, governance or finality of authority based on age advantage. The situation is part of the cultural heritage that, colonialism strived to erase from the life of the people but still lives strong in the memorial narratives of the people (David Udoinwang and James Tsaaior 2023). It is the prominence of birthright in the society. According to D. Adeleke,

> …the elder can say whatever he wants to the youth, he can be rude to the youth, he disrespects him and talks down on him, even when he (the elders) is at fault, and the youth must take it because he is the youth. There is even a saying in a Nigerian tribe that when the elders are talking, the youth must be quite. (6)

Gerontocracy accords elders much respect and status in the affairs of the society. In Nigeria generally, along with the undertone of the human community, "the practice of excessive respect for elders is uniform throughout Africa (Adebayo150). Gerontocracy is a practice of recognizing individual in the society based on their birthright, length of time on earth and accumulation of experience overtime.

Gerontocracy advocates the natural order of presence and the consciousness of self-discipline before an elder. Although, the idea is countered by a more trending concept like republicanism; the practice, as it is made to be, in the African setting does to attempt to heap the command of authority and power in totality to the one who is older, rather it seeks an avenue to revere the aged and promote respect to the older person by according him or her the place of importance among others. According to Musibau Oyebode,

> We generally believe that both the dead and living elders have pervasive influence over the fortunes of the living. In the same vein, in cultures where older age and ascending have a touch of vulnerability, elders both dead and living are respected because they are our predecessor and have served as purveyors for our existence today (19).

This may be the reason Omotade Adegbindin writes that it is "a rule by old men" (454); thereby, attempting to undermine it in Africa is tantamount to "revolutionary iconoclasm, destruction of traditional idols….and to welcome and assimilate the spirit of Europe" (Hountondi 172). The model is a direct confrontation with republicanism which a younger person can wield power and command the society anytime.

Put differently, among the Annang people of Nigeria, certain proverbs, adages and idioms are used to situate the primacy of age. Such expressions include: "*achongo-agwo, aseanoafong*" (it is the older that discards a dress to the younger). This means it is better for the elder to leave inheritance to the younger, "*ekaabomagwoifonnoikere Monday*" (An elderly person is not supposed to bear Monday). This means, an elder should select what to indulge in to avoid stains. In the view of John-Bosco Ekanem, Annang cosmos is arranged in the order of ascendency which predetermines the hierarchy from the village through the family down to the individual. This allows for respect and honour to be given to virtue, while reprehension and reproof are directed to vice. Thus, it is the elders that harness the reign of authority (63-64). The idea is designed in the accessories of *Akpan Ekpo* in which he displays during performance. "When a creative work embodies the components for which it is known, it may inspire aesthetics to consumers and motivate the desire to patronize (Udofia, Atakpo and Udoinwang57)". This consideration is apt within the type of gerontocracy that comes into the critical purview of this work.

Symbols of Gerontocracy in the Accessories of *Akpan Ekpo*

The pattern of *Akpan Ekpo* is a complex network of creative art woven from local materials such as grass, leaf, stick, tree-trunk and iron. All these are designed as body accessories to weave the masquerade, and every accessory has a culturally understood referent. To this effect, the costume of Akpan Ekpo is fully elaborated thus:

> Akpan Ekpo is formally addressed as *atoeruat* (javelin thrower). Its body apparatuses are: *eruat* (a spear), *iso-ekpo ye nnukita* (a mask with three horns), and one of the eyes is painted red. There is an interlocking design of *ajenadoong* (fresh palm frond) and *mkpatat* (a species of carpet grass) constructed on the head. On its waist, there is *ikwa* (a machete), neatly shielded and fastened along with pieces of costumes which sum up the *njogo* (waist girdle) and *mkpak-njogo* (waist band). The body is fully coated with *nkang* (charcoal). (Etim 75)

Drawing from the accessories Etim elaborates, each of the costume has a significant cultural referent. That notwithstanding, the ones this paper focuses on are mainly those accessories which alludes to gerontocratic orientation in the investigated society.

***Eruat* (spear)**



***Eruat*: Used for piercing the earth for *Ekpo* to emerge (Etim)**

Akpan Ekpo is the first child to *Eka Ekpo*. He appears first; and he has to open the womb for other *Ekpo* (deities) to be birthed. He uses the spear to pierce the earth. The spear is archetypal symbol of the phallus, while the earth symbolizes the womb. As the first son, he is accorded the power to initiate and control procreation in the society. With the spear piercing the earth, he calls on other masquerades to join him visit the world of men (performance).

***Nnuk Ita* (Three Horns)**



***Nnuk* Marks the Aged**

Akpan Ekpo has three pointed horns on the mask. No other masquerades have a horn on the mask. The mask is made from a walnut tree. Walnut trees survive for a long time. This horn symbolizes that Akpan is the oldest, the wisest and the most experience (Etim, 126). The horn marks him distinct as the aged. Thus, he arrives the earth first and determines the comeliness of other *Ekpo*. According to Ukiki cited in Etim, "horn comes with age and that brands it, the first son of the mother" (129).

Adadad Anyen Ked (The Red Painted-eye):



***Adadad Anyen ked:* Offending *Akpan* is Risky; The eye is Dangerous**

Akpan is designed with a deep spiritual undertone in the one-red-eye. It is the chief priest that has one eye painted with kaolin. This is always the linkage of his office with his divinity, making him a half-man and a half-spirit. The eye of *Akpan Ekpo* painted red shows that the masquerade is also dangerous. According to Sunday, the Chief Priest of *Ekpo* Ikpe Annang , "as the world advances, things are bound to change. Back then, for a woman to sight an *Ekpo* masquerade especially the *Akpan Ekpo,* was a taboo. Such woman was slaughtered by *Ekpo* and parts were shared" (cited in Etim, 136). The emphasis in the danger is placed on beholding the *Akpan* and, in most cases, the *Eka Ekpo*. This is the justification of his one-red-eye. The redness of the eye symbolized danger; and being specific to an eye of *Akpan Ekpo* alludes that old age should not be ridiculed.

Ajen Adoong (Fresh Palm Frond):





***Ajen Adoong* (Fresh palm-frond)*: Akpan Ekpo* is a Lawful Status**

It is only *Akpan Ekpo* that is decorated with the network of palm-frond (*ajenadoong)* as costume. *Akpan* is strewn with *ajenadoong* because he is the first child. *Ajenadoong* is used to exact injunction in Annang society. This, then, symbolizes that the first born is lawful or is accorded a legal status, which makes his words lawful.

Nkpatat (carpet grass):



***Nkpatat* (carpet grass)*: Ekpo's* hair and dead-bed**

This specie of grass strewn over the *Akpan Ekpo Mkpatat* is indexical in this context. An index is a situation a causative factor is equally found in what it causes or likely, the result or component of the agent. *Mkpatat* is the bed *Ekpo* lies on. *Ekpo* is a dead personage. They use *mkpatat* to lay the remains of the dead. However, deadness is the hair of the *Akpan Ekpo*.

Njogo (Waist Girdle)



***Njogo: Akpan Ekpo* uses it to Simulate Dance (Etim)**

This is what *Akpan Ekpo* girds on the waist to dance; *Akpan* is an entertainer. It needs the presence of the audience to retain its status as a unique performer. *Njogho* enhances the aesthetics of its heroic appeal.

Ikwa (Machete)



***Ikwa* (Machete) *:* Used for Security (Etim)**

Another costume found on Akpan Ekpo is a machete along with a bow and arrow. Some Annang people call a machete, '*akpanakama*', translated as 'it's Akpan that holds'. *Akpan Ekpo* uses this to protect himself and defend his siblings. A machete symbolizes security. In this

sense, it is the protection given by the older, aged, or wiser to the subordinate or follower. This symbolizes that old age is security.

Conclusion

The use of *Ekpo* performance to entertain the audience has been received with great enthusiasm; and this has made the masquerades appear quite attractive to the people of Akwa Ibom State and other parts on Nigeria who perform Ekpo in the different name it is called. However, *Ekpo* Ikpe Annang is remarkable for still aligning the philosophical undertone of the primordial *Ekpo* society in which categories of human beings in manners and temperamental discharges in name and performance was conceptualized to the level of spirituality and political configuration of the society. This is made emphatic even in the contemporary period in the trends of paraphernalia *Ekpo* is garbed.

Among the masquerades of Ikpe Annang people, the level of honour and elevation of status accorded their *Akpan Ekpo* has indicated the conception of order based on the order of arrival and knowledge acquisition from the perspective time lapses and the Annang-man's conception of wisdom. The reverence of the first child, the aged and the elders of the society is not actually viewed as an attempt to discourage early exploit by younger persons to distinguish themselves, rather, it the uses of performance to simulate an outlet for orderly and smooth transition of human culture in the society. This culture of the old raising the young usually resulted in parents dying first to leave acquisitions to their progeny. However, in the so-called civilized culture, where hastiness to acquire wealth, power and honour is the order of the day, it is the offspring that tend to die first, so to say, leaving his or her possession to parents. This is part of the travesties of postmodernity. The costume of *Akpan Ekpo,* rather, articulates a return to gerontocracy. The older should be accorded the well-deserved place and respect in society to ensure social order.

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