

Complexity as Aesthetics in the *Iri-Agha* of the Ohafia Igbo People

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Abstract

Very little is known of the diverse forms of African folklore, especially those with literary and artistic merit in spite of their pervasive presence within the continent and their unabated practice among the peoples that own them. As part of the efforts in filling this critical gap, this paper examines one of such forms among the Ohafia Igbo people of eastern Nigeria named the *Iri-Agha* - that is "war dance" in English. The essay's contention is that though a few studies have been carried out on the highly artistic and massively enjoyed dramatic enactment of the indigenous people, no scholarship exists in the area of its complexity of form. Here then lies the focus and significance of this essay which seeks to examine the intricacies of the traditional performance's formal features. The study deploys the method of qualitative ethnography involving close observation and interview of the practitioners of the art in the field collection of primary data, and the theory of ethno-poetics in the analysis the collected data. Consequently, the study discovers that the *Iri-Agha* depicts an artistic complexity that emanates from a seamless combination of materials from the dramatic, the narrative and the poetic arts and a blending of these with resources from the plastic and decorative arts. It concludes that the said complexity functions not just as a contributor to the aesthetic import of the traditional theatrical product, but as one of the principles for its evaluation as a work of art.

Keywords:

Complexity,
Aesthetics, *Iri-Agha*,
War, Dance, Drama,
Performance

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Background to the Study

There is, among the Ohafia Igbo of eastern Nigeria, a spectacular traditional dramatic performance called *Iri-Agha*, which means "War Dance." One of the most enduring but neglected features of this form is its complexity, which consists in a *mélange* of intricate and divergent materials. This study seeks to closely examine this feature of the traditional artistic enactment of the Ohafia people. Such an enquiry has become particularly imperative since no previous scholarship on that sub-genre of the people's oral literature has paid a deliberate attention to the intricacies of its form.

The study takes it for granted that the debate over the qualification of African ritual displays and other traditional theatrical enactments as drama has been laid to rest in favour of the relativist argument. It would be recalled that scholars have been divided on this subject matter along the evolutionist and relativist lines. This controversy, it has variously been observed (Okpewho 1992, Okoh 2002, Obuh 2006), is rooted in the 1970 comment by the famous British anthropologist, Ruth Finnegan, in which she declares African drama as not widespread and sufficiently developed in comparison with its counterparts in Europe and Asia and with other forms of oral literature in the prose and poetry genres. In the words of Finnegan, "Though some writers have very positively affirmed the existence of native African drama, it would perhaps be truer to say that in Africa, in contrast to Western Europe and Asia, drama is not typically a wide-spread or a developed form" (500). One of the major reasons for the above position of the anthropologist's is that the so-called African drama has "little or no linguistic content" (509).

By her assertion, Finnegan comes through as an evolutionist especially regarding her idea of development. Toeing the lines of Finnegan, subsequent evolutionist thinkers like M. J. C. Echeruo, Kalu Uka and Ola Rotimi insist that what is called drama in Africa is not drama but mere ritual displays and the doings of primitive people from which drama may evolve if well-handled like the Europeans did with the Dionysian ritual from which tragedy, comedy and other major dramatic forms emerged. According to Echeruo, for instance:

The dramatic content is, in other words, buried in the ritual purity of the festival. What is needed then, it seems to me, is to force that ritual to yield its story; to cut through the overlay of ceremony to the primary events of the mythos. Ritual is, and has always been, a dead end, it cannot grow" ("Dramatic Limits" 179)

Similarly, Kalu Uka alleges that "What is usually called traditional drama... is not yet drama. It is the huge legacy upon which drama may draw... What some usually and glibly call traditional drama is the sum total of the doings of peoples before written records were kept" (qtd. in Okoh 146).

The relativists, on the contrary, are of the opinion that robust and full-fledged drama already exists in such African ritual displays as the festival and masquerade

performances and as such requires no European or Asian models. The specific views of such relativists as Emmanuel Obiechina, Ossie Enekwe and Nkem Okoh which clearly hinge on the notion of cultural relativism, are therefore that there is a difference between the constituents of African and European dramas, hence African drama should not be looked at from European lenses neither should it be considered a developing phenomenon or something that must grow in the same manner as the European drama allegedly did. This position is largely captured in the following comparative query of Obiechina's:

Is there any particular reason, except that of meeting the specifically practical pressures of the present age, why an enactment should last only two or three hours instead of six months? Is the sense of organic unity which we assume in the modern theatre and its conventions not possible on an extended scale among a people whose sensibilities are trained to absorb more diffused ritual and symbolic significance of action? Is a broad communal canvas not more suitable for painting more inclusive social and emotional action than the mere mouse-tongue platform called the modern stage? (183)

As already hinted at, this study is inclined to the convictions of the relativist school, but its focus is not to demonstrate that the *Iri-Agha* is drama (for that is no longer in doubt), neither is it to explore such issues as content or social functions of that dramatic form, but to examine the intricate network of materials which practitioners of the *Iri-Agha* art put into its enactment, and to draw from thence a conclusion regarding the critical, and perhaps artistic, role of that overlooked feature of the traditional art.

For the authenticity of data, I have relied on several years of close observation, audio and audio-visual recordings and, of course, interviews with practitioners of the art in the manner of the father of modern anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski, who, according to Isidore Okpe who, believed that “only first-hand experience of a society and careful study of the various forms and aspects of its cultural life would qualify us to make categorical statements about any one aspect of its cognitive system” (“Introduction” 2). This approach was made easy by my being a native of Ohafia, the very natural habitat of the form under study. The method of investigation in the study is therefore that of qualitative ethnography, while the theory for the analysis of primary data is Ethno-Aesthetics.

The qualitative research methodology is a field research, which, according to Earl Babbie, “is especially appropriate to the study of those attitudes and behaviors best understood within their natural setting, as opposed to the somewhat artificial settings of experiments and surveys” (287). Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln provide further insight into the intricacies of the method. In their words:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this

level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. ("Introduction" 4)

Similarly, ethnography is defined in *Wikipedia Free Encyclopedias* as "an illuminative account of social life and culture in a particular social system based on multiple detailed observations of what people actually do in the social setting being observed (1). Therefore, qualitative ethnography designates the descriptive and interpretative study of a people's cultural phenomenon based on how these people perceive it without recourse to certain formal and written rules or pontifications from external influences.

Ethno-Aesthetics on its part is a theory suited for the analysis of ethnographic materials. Rooted in the idea of cultural relativism and the theory of ethnography, Ethno-Aesthetics focuses on the aesthetic qualities of the traditional artistic products of an indigenous, cultural group. It does not attempt viewing or interpreting native art based on external lenses or rules. According to Simon Sierruh in the "Anthropology of Art," an Ethno-Aesthetic analysis is used when trying to understand art done by indigenous people, by looking at the art within its context. To do this successfully, using cultural relativism is key; we must look at art under its own terms rather than placing it under western values" (1).

The indigenous artistic product under study in this essay is the *Iri-Agha*, and the focus of the essay is to examine its complex form. An Ethno-Aesthetic investigation of such a concern involves a close examination of the intricate parts of the object based on first-hand observation, experience and information from experts and professional practitioners rather than on established critical criteria.

The Ohafia Igbo People: Geography, Origin, Culture and Literature

Ohafia is an Igbo-speaking community located at the northern extreme of Abia State. Philip Nsugbe's 1994 classification places Ohafia among the "Cross River Igbo" group. According to him, "The Cross-River Ibo [sic] grouping comprises the Ohafia and five other Ibo communities. Those others are Nkporo Ada to the north of Ohafia, the Ihe and Aro to the south, the Abam to the south-west and Abiriba to the west, The territories of these communities, including the Ohafia, mark the geographical frontier of Ibol and in the east" (qtd. in Ngwoke 2).

Made up of twenty-six villages, Ohafia, with its Abiriba neighbours, forms a local government of the same name. Its population is approximately 3 million people. In terms of land mass, Ohafia covers an area of approximately one thousand and fifty square kilometres and can be accessed from Umuahia, the state capital, through either the Bende or Uzuakoli axes. It is bounded in the south by Umuchi Akuma in Arochukwu Local Government Area, in the north by Abiriba and Edda in Afikpo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, in the west by the Abam and Igbere clans in Bende Local Government Area all in Abia State, and in the east by Biase Local Government Area of Cross River State.

The Igbos, generally, have their home in the Southern part of Nigeria, specifically in seven states of the country including: Abia, Anambra, Delta, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, and Rivers States. However, while the southeastern states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo are the main Igbo homelands, Delta and Rivers States have Igbo-speaking parts which are linked to core Igbo communities by means of migration histories or by some kind of contiguity.

Oral tradition has it that the Ohafia people migrated from Owan, a community in the Old Benin Kingdom in the present-day Edo state in the 15th century AD due to a civil war between the Oba of Benin and his chiefs, and first settled at Ndoni, a community in the present-day Rivers State located on the bank of River Niger. From Ndoni, they settled at Ibeku in Umuahia, the capital city of Abia State, and later at Amaelu Abam, and then at their present abode, first stopping at a place called Ugwumgbo.

The Ohafia people speak the Ohafia dialect of Igbo, which is classified among the north-west Igbo languages sufficiently different from the central Igbo language. Like all other languages and dialects of the world, the Ohafia Igbo dialect is the vehicle of the people's culture, literature and general artistic tradition. The oral art of the people consists of forms that include a robust oral literature. Incidentally, this study is concerned with one of the forms of Ohafia oral literature, namely, the *Iri-Agha*, a sub-category of her drama genre. Below is a diagrammatical classification of Ohafia oral literature. The *Iri-Agha* has been asterisked for emphasis:

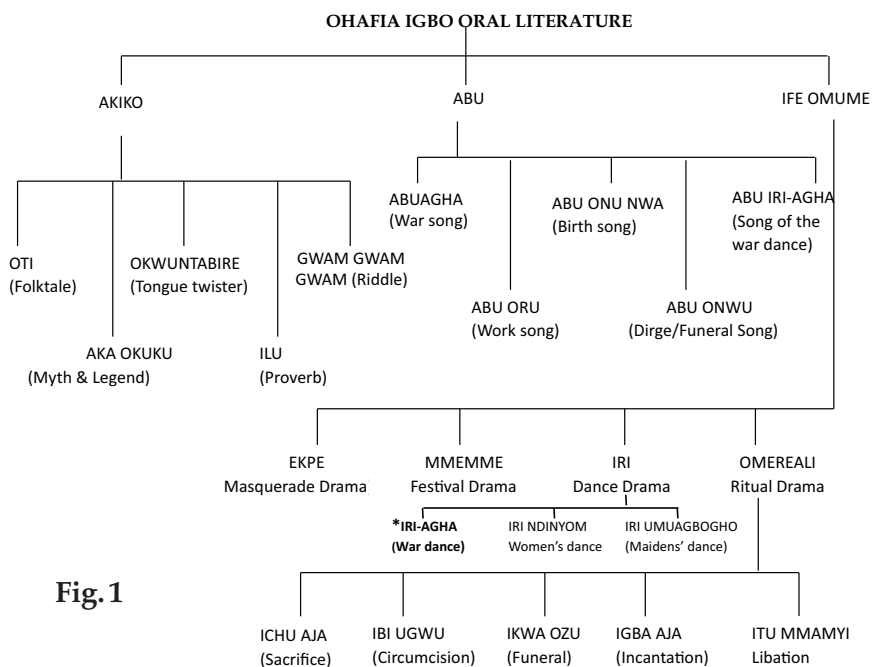


Fig.1

The Iri-Agha: Overview, Origin, Spread and Continuity

Overview

The *Iri-Agha* is one of the most prominent and massively enjoyed cultural, occasional and ritualized traditional performances of the Ohafia Igbo people. It is a dance in which only energetic and robustly-built men are involved. It usually has a central figure or lead dancer carrying on his head aboard or rack on which sit three figures having the form of the human skull. The wooden board is often very well placed on the chief dancer's head by means of a pad of leaves or cloth to ensure balance and to prevent it from falling. The three figures on the rack are conceived of as human heads and the object of their covering is usually the traditional *okpuagu* (Tiger cap) – a cone-shaped, hand-knitted, woolen cap of black, red and white colours with a ball-like tip. This cap which originated from Ohafia is now a popular costume among the Igbo generally.

The dance is, expectedly, to music produced by a combination of traditional instruments like wooden batons (*akwatankwa*), hand-held wooden gongs (*ekwe*), drums (*nkwa*), horns (*opu*) and by the singing of gifted individuals and professionals. The dancing involves an energetic up-and-down heaving of the curvaceous male chests, a general rhythmical vibration of the entire trunk, and well-patterned leg movements to match the melody and rhythm from the music. The dancers are usually few and the singers have different parts.

Like the head-like figures on the rack, each of the dancers wears the *okpuagu*, while having on as the only item of clothing, a short, thick and tough hand-woven fabric, usually dark blue in colour worn around the waist. Visible too are other minor items of costume and make-up. The spectacular dance appeals to a massive audience, thus it draws an avalanche of male and female spectators.

Origin

There are different accounts of origin of the *Iri-Agha*. The most popular, however, is the vague version which traces the performance's origin to the remote past when after the cantankerous and war-like Ohafia people had settled through migration on their present abode, found expression for their restlessness and warrior ethos in provoked and unprovoked raids of nearby and distant communities. As already noted, part of the different ways by which the early Ohafia men proved their manhood was by bringing home to the community fresh and blood-dripping male human heads cut during raids or wars. Their main targets were young and able-bodied men, while the heads of children, adolescents and women were regarded as wrong heads. The returnee warriors were considered real men if they brought fresh human heads, while those who did not bring home the approved heads were regarded as weaklings, cowards or “women”.

The war dance arose from the celebration by the successful warriors who danced round the village square displaying their human-head booties of war. Interestingly, each warrior tried to tell through dance steps and body movements the stories of his escapades at the war front or raid. Some of the dance steps were aimed at dramatizing how the warriors stole close to their targets before doing the needful, while some body movements

were a demonstration of the painful writhing of the headless bodies of victims immediately after their severance from their heads. These aspects of imitation and re-enactment of the original events have survived and constitute the very hub of the traditional theatre's spectacle as they are not just intriguing but also enthralling to spectators/audiences across decades and centuries.

Much more specific and precise than the above is the account presented by Stanley Obuh in his essay, "From Dramatic Events to Ritual Theatre: The Origins of *Ekekon Ute* and *Iri-Agha* Festival Plays", which links the origin of the traditional drama to a time in the 18th century when a traditional Ohafia chief, Nna Uduma Egu, was murdered by enemies from a neighbouring community. To make matters worse, the "entrails" (115) of the slain chief "were tied across the road" (115) at a junction bounding the two communities for the young men working for the chief to discover.

Consequently, the women of Ohafia threatened to abandon their husbands if a solution to the insulting, sacrilegious and dreadful act of their enemies which was threatening their very existence was not found. The *Ikoru*, a large traditional wooden gong used for summoning a meeting, was sounded and in the ensuing gathering elders of the land after a long period of deliberations instituted a prize of a hairy goat, which was tied to a ritual tree to be claimed by anybody who found solution to the predicament facing the village. A young man named Kalu Ezera took up the challenge and, joined by two other men named Nna Mgbachi Ebi and Nna Uka Aki, went on an expedition to solve the problem of their land. Following their consultations with diviners, they attacked their enemies in broad daylight as they were working in the farm. The result was a massive death of their enemies and the Ohafia warriors harvested as many heads as they could carry.

However, trouble ensued when it was time to go home as Nna Uka Aki could not be found by the other two, and after many hours of fruitless search for him, they decided to go home. But close to home, they heard the sound of the *Ikoru*, and upon getting home properly they discover that the one whom they thought was lost was already at home celebrating in the village square with the rest of the villagers. The two join in the celebration the high point of which was the trio's elaborate demonstration of "the process of tracking down and killing the enemy" (116). Overwhelmed by this striking display of both bravery and art, the community accord the trio the right to beat the *ikoro* as a mark of honour and heroism. After this first *Iri-Agha* performance, it became a privilege and a sign of honour to beat the *ikoro*. Consequently, every young man within the village wanted to beat the *ikoro*, hence their quest for communal wars so as to bring home heads. Thus, "in the traditional Ohafia society, *Iri-Agha* became a dance of honour for all males such that any male who could not present a human head got from a war would not be initiated into the exclusive and prestigious *Ufiem* warrior society" (116).

The vague and specific accounts point to the same origin of the war dance, namely, the aftermath of war in which the successful Ohafia warriors, through dancing, demonstrated, as part of their celebration of victory, the processes involved in the stalking, killing and decapitation of their target enemies.

Spread and Continuity

The first *Iri-Agha*, as we have noted, was performed by the three Ohafia warriors at the specific occasion of their successful return from a revenge war. The dance continued to serve as a form of celebration after a successful war until later when the people began to stage it as part of their preparation for wars. It is at this point that the purely secular dramatic art became ritualized as Ohafia warriors re-enacted the war dance as a form of propitiation to the warrior ancestors to ensure victory in the war. The act of propitiation involved incantations of praise and supplication to the warrior ancestors by the present war leader, libation and the sacrificing of a white cock. With the passage of time, *Iri-Agha* became a cultural performance re-enacted at specific occasions like the commemoration of the warrior ethos of the Ohafia people, at the burial of a great warrior or a member of the great *Ufiem* warrior society, the burial of a member of the practitioners of the art itself, and at the funeral of old men. Today, it has become oversimplified and almost an entirely secular performance involving even adolescents and staged on even very trivial occasions. It has also become a performance for political campaigns and other governmental functions where entertainment is required and an avenue for money-making.

A Review of Literature

The *Iri-Agha* has attracted considerable critical comments. Stanley Obuh's concern in his insightful and somewhat polemical study is to demonstrate that the *Iri-Agha* is one of the African traditional dramatic art forms which, unlike what the evolutionist theorists have made us believe, have metamorphosed from a purely secular art to a ritual drama instead of the other way round. His work is etched against the evolutionist theory of early anthropologists which conceives of drama as evolving directly from ritual. Pitching his tent rather with the relativists of which Ossie Enekwe and Gerald Else are his pivotal models, Obuh contends that contrary to the evolutionist idea, the *Iri-Agha* drama evolved from a secular art to a ritual drama. "This researcher", writes Obuh, "has chosen to describe this process of transmogrification in which an originally secular and artistic phenomenon acquires sacred or religious undertone as the *ritualization of art*" (117-118).

Unlike Obuh, Chukwuma Azuonye's essay is on performance, and specifically on the artistry and professionalism of a specific singer of the heroic epic songs of the *Iri-Agha*. This is Kaalu Igirigiri, a man who, by Azuonye's assessment, ranks as the best practitioner of the tale-singing art in the *Iri-Agha* complex because of his ability to maintain in his singing "the traditional aesthetic principles of the Ohafia oral epic song" which include functionality, authenticity, clarity and creative variation (48-49).

The social implication of the *Iri-Agha* is the very concern of N. E. Obuba in a section of her book *The History and Culture of Ohafia*. She observes that the *Iri-Agha* represents the Ohafia people's way of commemorating uncommon victories, bravery, courage and integrity. In her words, "The Ohafia War Dance (Iri Agha) is a celebration of affirmed manhood, proven courage, triumph over adversaries, and victory in war. In the past, a hunter who killed a leopard, or a warrior who valiantly vanquished enemies of the community in the

thick of battle, was celebrated as having taken a 'head' or a couple of 'heads'..." (26). In contrast to the foregoing scholars, Leonard Ndubuisi Mbah is fascinated by the mimetic content of the *Iri-Agha* drama and, of course, its social implications. To this end, he comments as follows:

...I witnessed the Ohafia war dance (iri-aha). The lead dancer carried a basket of human skulls, the dancers were dressed as fierce warriors, they moved like leopards, and they mimed the act of cutting off human heads and stowing them in an imaginary pouch. The war dancers portrayed Ohafia as land of brave warriors, an image that resonated with the folktales I heard growing up. Indeed, this was the dominant social image of the society: a society of warriors without women. (qtd. in Chiukpai ???)

In another development, Prince Igwe Orji comments, in an oral interview, on the changing roles of the war dance. He notes that the dance functioned for the early Ohafia owners of it as an incentive during their incessant wars, but that in contemporary times, that role has changed, especially as Christianity has eroded the dark idea of head-hunting. According to him:

Irionwaekuyairi-aha - Ohafia War Dance. Ejiya ne 'je aha mbg' ichin. Mbg' qri Ohafian'egbuishinmadu, ejiya n' eje aba. Ugbue, churchiabiale. Christianity e tekile over. Anyianigh' egbukwanmadu. Churchiewereleonodi.

This dance is called iri-aha - Ohafia War Dance. We used it to go to war in time past. When Ohafia used to cut human heads, we used it during the war. But now, church has come. Christianity has taken over. We no longer kill people. The Church has replaced it (Oral interview) (qtd. in Chiukpai ??)

Elaborating on the changing roles of the Ohafia war dance, John C. McCall notes that such other feats of bravery as educational and professional qualifications have overtaken head-taking as the very reasons for staging the *Iri-Agha* in contemporary Ohafia, thus, making it amenable to current realities in the society. According to him:

...the complex of warrior ceremonies that culminate in Iri Agha (war dance), [is] a celebration of trophy-heads that, when taken in battle, signify manly accomplishment. The Iri Agha continues to play a significant role in defining Ohafia identity and masculine achievement. The accomplishments now celebrated, however, are college degrees, professional promotions, grand gestures of largesse, and community development. These are the modern equivalents to "heads." (70)

It would be noticed from the foregoing studies on *Iri-Agha* that no attention has been paid to its structure or form. It is in view of plugging part of this critical whole that this study, which examines the complexity of form as an aspect of aestheticism in the *Iri-Agha* is conceived. Undoubtedly, the complexity of the enthralling epic performance is

deserving of a scholarly attention. It is also hoped that in addition to solving the problem of lack of scholarship in structure, this will add to the growing body of works on the widely enjoyed dramatic and artistic product of the indigenous people of Ohafia.

The Concepts of Complexity, Aestheticism and Drama

The word “complexity” refers to “the state of being formed of many parts” and “the state of being difficult to understand” (*Oxford* 294). It is the idea of having many parts rather than being difficult to understand that is conceived of in our use of the term in this essay. The study simply underlines that *Iri-Agha* is made of many parts, and seeks to examine these parts in an effort towards understanding what makes *Iri-Agha* distinct as a traditional dramatic art.

Aesthetics, on its part, is a concept rooted in philosophy, while also extending implications to other fields. Fundamentally, it is a branch of philosophy dealing with the question of beauty, while in terms of creativity; it is an endeavor in the realm of artistic taste. Corroborating this view and more, Heidi Jacobs defines it as “the study of beauty in both nature and art. Aesthetics addresses philosophical questions about the nature of beauty, psychological questions about the effects of beauty and theoretical issues related to taste and perception of beauty” (3). Aesthetic, according to Roger Fowler, is “the result of perceiving something not as a means but as an end itself, not as useful but as ornamental, not as instrument but as achievement” (4).

Earlier, the German philosopher, Alexander Baumgarten noted in *Aesthetica* (1750) that “the aesthetic end is in the perfection of sensuous cognition, as such; this is beauty” (qtd. in Abrams and Harpham 4). Abrams and Harpham note that “In present usage, aesthetics designates the systematic study of all the fine arts, as well as of the nature of beauty in any subject, whether natural or artificial” (4).

The meanings of aesthetics are perhaps best captured by Lawal, for according to him, “aesthetics deals with the philosophy of the beautiful as well as with *the standards of value in judging art and other aspects of human life and culture*” (Lawal 1974: 239 My emphasis). Aesthetics is, therefore, conceived of in this study in terms of the two meanings of the word, but more importantly, as the principles that define a particular work of art and by which it could be judged and then, as the sources of the work's beauty.

Drama has itself been defined by many scholars in various ways beginning with Aristotle who plainly describes it as an imitated human action. Subsequent scholarships on that literary form depict inclinations towards one or the other of two forms of drama designated by J. P. Clark as modern and traditional drama (“Aspects” 71). Even though Clark's focus in this essay is on Nigerian drama, his delineation is true of all peoples of the world. M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham are, for instance, inclined to the modern/scripted form of drama in their definition which sees drama as “the form of composition designed for performance in the theater, in which actors take the roles of the characters, perform the indicated actions, and utter the written dialogue” (93). Chinyere

Nwahunanya observes further that modern/scripted drama “has always relied on the principle of a stage enactment of a story based on certain conventions, which have to do with performance space, characters and the resources used to enable the characters act out a theme before an audience” (65).

Conversely, traditional drama is unscripted and consists in: Actions significant to the people... The physical representation or evocation of some poetic image or a complex of such images, its vital elements are speech, music, ritual, songs, dance, mime... Its aim is to “open the ear” of mind of spectators in a corporate audience and “open his eyes” to the beauty of form. (qtd in Onyema 1)

Unlike the modern/scripted form, traditional drama does not depend on any laid-down strict and written rules and conventions for its creation and enactment. In the following excerpt, Nkem Okoh delineates the characteristics of traditional drama in a manner that contrasts it with the modern/scripted form:

(i) it is an occasional phenomenon (like several other forms of oral literature, it takes place within the demand and confines of traditional festivals) (ii) Such occasionality is tied up with the myth - ritual dimensions of African drama (iii) it is primarily a communal event or occasion (iv) it is not 'box office' or profit- oriented (v) it includes, indeed enjoins, full audience participation (vi) it is not particularly rich in dialogue or verbalization (such de-emphasis on formal dialogue and speech makes it no less *mimetic*) (vii) it employs much mime, music, and dance by professional singers and drummers (viii) it displays a longer, more elastic and flexible schedule (ix) it employs a “natural” stage (x) it displays various other unique features, e.g. of lighting, costuming and props. (169-170)

Iri-Agha is traditional drama; it is “literature that talks and moves about before the eyes of its audience” (Nwabueze, 162).

***Iri-Agha* as Dance and Ritual Drama**

In our taxonomy of the Ohafia oral literature above, we classified *Iri-Agha* within both the dance and ritual drama sub-categories. This duality is part of the form's complexity. To begin with the dance drama sub-strata, one has first to understand the meaning and implications of the phenomenon of dance. Dance, ordinarily speaking, is the systematic and rhythmical movement of the body often in response to music as a form of entertainment both to the dancer and to an audience. According to the *Universal Dictionary*, dance is “To move rhythmically, usually to music, using prescribed or improvised steps and gestures” (394). While there are different types of dance from folk, mask, festive, religious to cultural and war, dances tell stories of different kinds. Or better put, dances are staged for different purposes and have different significations ranging from cultural and psychological to metaphysical, ritual and religious. To Igor Moiseyev, for instance, folk dance is a psychological affair because it, according to him, represents:

A crystallization of human's innermost feelings and psychology, his national character, tastes and musical perception of the world. Moreover, a folk dance is a unique portrait of a nation done in the plastic medium. It is poetry without words, a song that can be seen, a mirror of the human soul. (qtd. in Orie 226)

Dance is integral to traditional theatre and its different manifestations like the festival, the masquerade, the ritual and indeed the dance dramas. None of these forms of traditional African theatre can function independently of dance as an accompaniment of music and singing. Dance is central to the consciousness of the black man. It functions for him as entertainment, recreation and a veritable means of transmitting certain values ranging from cultural, religious, philosophical, mystical, mythological, to economic and social. It is in recognition of the significance of dance that Nwabueze notes as follows:

African dancing is varied and intricate and therefore cannot be fully understood without considering both the text and the context of dance. It is through the text and context of dance that its function is discerned since dance in Africa plays more vital roles than mere entertainment (102)

The drama subgenre designated as dance dramas so-named because its mode of operation is distinctly dancing, sustained dancing to the traditional accompaniments of song and music. Every scene and event is transmitted to the audience by means of intricate dance steps unlike the situation in allied sub-genres like the festival and masquerade dramas where certain activities could be executed by means other than dancing.

Ritual drama as a distinct sub-category involves activities “conventionally consecrated to some religious figure” (Okpewho 262). The *Iri-Agha* enactment, as Obuh has observed, involves sacrifices aimed as propitiation to the warriors that first performed the act who are now ancestors. Even in cases today, especially in urban areas, where the *Iri-Agha* is enacted purely for secular purposes, particles of its original ritual base are evident. For example, the dancers never fail to brandish a white cock while performing the dance and the lead singer never ceases to make supplications to ancestors and the gods for support. In the light of the above, *Iri-Agha* is at once a dance and ritual drama because it incorporates the features of both drama sub-genres.

***Iri-Agha* as a Mélange of Dramatic, Poetic and Prose Narrative Resources**

As already noted, the *Iri-Aga* depicts a form that consists of a seamless combination of materials from the three genres of literature. However, while the poetic and narrative components of the *Iri-Agha* are yoked together, the dramatic aspect could be considered as slightly distinct enough to be described separately even though all fuse together in the final analysis to evolve the absorbing traditional theatrical performance.

The Dramatic Component

Fundamental to drama is action. Okpe who acknowledges this in his definition of drama as “an entertainment conveyed basically through suggestive or symbolic action and

movement and defining an experience" (262). Added to action is dialogue, and because traditional drama is basically theatrical action, costume, make-up and prop are vital elements. These are some of the resources that this section shall be examining in connection to *Iri-Agha*.

Much of the charm of the *Iri-Agha* stems from its elaborate, spectacular and mimetic action realized in the form of dance. While the dance component of most dance dramas may simply be an enactment of man's gift for the intricate and beautiful movement of the body to the rhythm provided by a combination of instruments and singing, the dance in *Iri-Agha* is mimetic. As already hinted at, the dance component of the *Iri-Agha* complex is fundamentally conceived and rendered as a re-enactment of the experiences of the early Ohafia warriors who originated the art. And particularly significant are the different dance patterns and movements which are entertaining, suggestive and, most importantly, symbolic.

First among the different dance patterns is that described in native parlance as *alulu*, which we have roughly translated here as or tagged the *vibration act*. This is the most popular dance pattern or movement involving the seemingly uncontrollable up and down heaving and vibration of the torso of the able- and bare-bodied dancers to the rhythm of the accompanying music. The vibration dance is imitative, particularly, of the painful writhing of the headless bodies of victims at the incessant wars in which the Ohafia ancestors were involved following the bodies' sudden severance from their heads. The mass appeal which *Iri-Agha* engenders owes more to the vibration act than to any other dance pattern. It is so captivating to spectators that they often involuntarily join in the performance. In fact, it is this aspect of the entire corpus that lingers in the minds and lips of members of the audience long after the performance has ended.

Another dance pattern is the *stealthy dance*, which involves a back and forth and sideways movement of the legs using the toes. Delicately executed, this mimics the sneaky movement of the head-hunting Ohafia ancestors while stalking their enemies during the wars or raids. This, of course, was to prevent escape or resistance from the target victims who could be strong enough to confront and even over-power the Ohafia warriors. This dance pattern is also a delight to watch, and the dancers, while performing this pattern, take on an entirely different form in terms of body structure. They look like the cock making advances at the hen or the he-goat at the she-goat.

Another dance pattern is the *Aghambembedance*. As already noted, *agha* means "war", while *mbembe* means "shadow". Thus, *aghambebe* means "shadow war" or more perceptibly "non-physical war", which invariably represents ailment the climax of which is death. The *aghambembe* dance pattern is a response to the *Aghambembe* song, which Chief Agbailidika Okwara of Ebem Ohafia, a renowned practitioner of the *Iri-Agha* play, identifies as having originated from the burial ceremony of either of two illustrious sons of Ohafia, namely, Professor Eni Njoku and Professor Kalu Ezera. The dance pattern grew out of an improvisation by the gifted dancers following the lead singer's on-the-spot

creation of a song by the same name. The *aghambembe* song and dance pattern were invented to underscore the fact that one could be involved in a battle which unlike those from which the *Iri-Agha* originated, are not confrontational. Having originated from a funeral occasion, the new song and dance pattern was meant to decry man's inability to win a war against death.

From that humble beginning, *aghambembe* has remained one of the major dance patterns in the *Iri-Agha* spectacle. It involves a deliberate forward movement through heavy but rhythmical stamping of the feet symbolic of advancing towards an enemy for the purpose of confronting the dual enemies of sickness and death; and then, a sudden retreat, but now in a much slower manner by stepping backwards while still facing the enemy. The sound produced by the stamping of the feet provides part of melody required for the simulated occasion.

Following action in the dramatic scheme of things is dialogue, which is communication between and among characters. While it is true that the dancers and the participating audience interact linguistically in the course of action, dialogue in *Iri-Agha* also manifests in forms other than the usual verbal exchange. Much of the dialogue in the Ohafia war dance is extra-linguistic, involving the instrumentalists and the dancers, the instrumentalists and the lead singer, the lead singer and the flute blower, the lead singer and the back-up singer, et cetera.

Practitioners of the traditional art admit that the music makers decide the dance step or pattern that the dancers display. Mr. Idika Umah, a professional in the art, comments as follows: "It is the kind of music played by the instrumentalists that determines the kind of dance step we exhibit. As you may have observed, there are different dance steps in this our thing. If you are observant, you will discover that we change steps as the music changes" (18th April, 2000).

Similarly, the lead singer dialogues with the instrumentalists in a non-linguistic manner. Often, the dance is set off with the beating of the wooden batons which invariably calls the lead singer into action and then the rest of the instrumentalists and performers. This process could be reversed with the singer taking the initiative by intoning the opening formula which is usually a melodious shrill followed by lines of proud eulogy to the Ohafia nation and its citizens with special reference to their bravery and self-belief. Here is an instance:

Eeeeeeeee!
Eeeeeeeee!
Eeeeeeeee!
Chi ejiaee!
Ohafia Udumezemaeee!
Mbabuisiachoisiwoacho!
Animalaabaliawumedu
Edu la abali 'o chikwaraagbuoafuoya a aka

Kpakpandokpapereonwa
Onwabugiuozobiaigwe!
Eeeeeeeee!
Eeeeeeeee!
Eeeeeeeee!
Night has come e!
Ohafia Udumezemaeeee!
The people that have their heads intact and yet hunt for their heads
I am not a night crawler because I am not leopard
The night-crawling leopard risks handling his intestine
The stars give way to the moon
The moon came to the skies before you

The opening formula helps to enlist the guidance and direction of the gods of the land and to draw the attention of all present from the music makers to the dancers and spectators all of whom respond by focusing on the unfolding events.

In the course of action, the singer could eulogize individual performers who respond in different ways. The flutist responds via his flute, the drummer his drum, the baton beater his batons, the back-up singer his voice and the dancers more vigorous bodily vibrations or more beautiful and elaborate leg movements. Often, the praise is targeted at specific warriors (dead and alive), well-meaning individuals within the community who may be present but not participants in the action or who are not present at all during the performance. When they are present, they respond and when they are not, it is believed that they have responded in some way.

From dialogue we come to costume. The *Iri-Agha* costume is simple. Its main item is the *onugwe*, which is a skimpy hand-woven, dark blue, tough loin cloth. While the shortness of this main costume is to enable free movement of the dancers, it was originally aimed at enhancing smart and free movement of the head hunters during the raids. Different actors have different ways of wearing the loin cloth. While some simply strap it round the waist, others manipulate it in a way that one end of it juts down from the waist to provide a kind of special cover to the crotch region. Strapped over the loin cloth is usually a sheathed machete aimed at completing the re-creation of the warrior outlook of the dancers.

Another item of costume is the *nzaebulu*, the fur of a ram. It is worn on either or both of the arms, particularly around the biceps. The fur is a symbol of strength and bravery in tune with the warrior ethos of the Ohafia people. In addition to the fur is the already mentioned *okpuagu*– the tiger cap, which, like fur, symbolizes manliness and its attendant bravery, courage and strength. Other items of costume are a strip of white cloth tied around the neck and abeaded neck-less, while wrist bands and a fly whisk are matters of choice.

Related to costume is make-up. Make-up in *Iri-Agha* is not as elaborate as it may be in other traditional dramas. Reason is that *Iri-Agha* is a re-enactment of war situations, which is a

serious occasion and not a revelry. The main object of make-up here is *nzu* (a native powder solution). It is usually decked around the eyes of the dancer. In response to my question regarding the significance of that piece of make-up, Chief Okwara had this to say: "If it is about the native powder that we rub around our eyes, it is not really anything too serious but mainly a source of disguise. You know, when you appear like that, an oncoming person will not easily recognize you" (11th Feb., 2020). Contrary to Chief Okwara's explanation, some other practitioners of the dance link the eye adornment with some form of spirituality or superstition. They suggest that it bestows on the dancers some kind of a strange or double vision in the same manner as it did the warriors of old, thus enabling them to locate the hideouts of their target enemies. The dancers sometimes adorn their bodies with other colours of make-up.

Concerning items of prop, our first port of call would be the figures borne by the lead dancer. As already noted, two of the head-like figures are definitely sculpted as could be made out from their half covering. The one in the middle, which is fully covered, practitioners have stated, is a real human skull, concealed to prevent the horror that its beholding may induce on under-aged spectators and perhaps women. Other properties are the musical instruments like the drums, wooden battens, horn, gongs, et cetera.

The Poetry and Prose Synthesis

Second in significance to dance in the *Iri-Agha* complex is the song accompaniment of music. Like the dancing, singing in *Iri-Agha* is in fact one aspect of the enactment that endears people to the traditional art. One reason for this is the shire competence of most of the traditional bards which result from both natural gift and training. Azuonye reveals this fact through an interview excerpt from one of the most accomplished singers in the heroic epic tradition of the Ohafia Igbo people. According to the informant/singer:

If you are a singer and people recognize the fact that your voice is sweet but know that you have not been trained by a person well-versed in the art of historical remembrance (*iku aka*), that is, a person who says what Ohafia people as a whole accept; if you simply lock up yourself in your house singing to please yourself, or even if you go out and sing with others, you will never be credited as singing with the voice of an experienced singer: you will never be able to sing what Ohafia people as a whole will accept. The truth is this: if you are a singer, if your voice is sweet. Ohafia people will tell you. "Go and meet Kaalulgirigiri. He will teach you songs. Your voice is sweet." When you come to me, I will tell you all those stories which the old masters told me. If you sing these stories as told, Ohafia people as a whole will accept: women will accept, men will accept, everyone ... But if you stay in your house singing to please yourself, without any course of training under a master-singer, your songs can never be sweet; you will never be able to sing properly. (qtd. in Azuonye44)

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of the song/singing component of *Iri-Agha* is its fusion of prose narrative into poetry. By this is meant that the songs of the *Iri-Agha* consist of tales of different kinds and categories ranging from anecdotes and folk tales to legends

and myths. The broadness of the singers' repertoire of tales covers the different sub-categories including allegorical and aetiological tales, tales of animal and human characterization, migration and heroic legends, creation and origin myths.

Interestingly, creativity in the *Iri-Agha* seems to have its best expression in the song and singing component. The talented singers bring into their rendering of known and new tales materials that are extraneous to the original. This ingenuity endears most singers to the audience, and this sort of creativity is possible because tales and such other narrative forms as myths and legends are free-phrase forms. Furthermore and as already hinted at, the *Iri-Agha* has metamorphosed from a purely secular through a ritual performance to a popular ceremonial theatre performance staged even at political rallies and campaigns and at strictly social occasions in honour of prominent members of the society and Government functionaries. Expectedly, therefore, gifted singers deftly weave into their songs the realities of the time and occasion, while also creating new songs out of prevalent circumstances. The *aghambembe* is such a creation. In sum, contemporary events have become part of the contents of the songs of the Ohafia war dance.

Conclusion

So far, this study has tried to demonstrate that the *Iri-Agha* of the Ohafia Igbo people of eastern Nigeria is a complex traditional theatre. Complexity in this context has been shown to mean the act of having different parts rather than of being difficult to understand. To account for the said complexity, the study has underlined, among other things, that the *Iri-Agha* has at once an outlook of a secular, popular and ritual theatre. It has also shown that the *Iri-Agha* is a conglomerate of resources from the dramatic, the narrative and the poetic genres of literature, and a blending of all these with materials from the plastic and decorative arts. The study has as well revealed that the charm of the traditional performance rests on its practitioners' ability to seamlessly infuse the disparate materials into the very fabric of the product and manipulate same in an enthralling total theatre-like experience capable of holding spectators spellbound for hours and drawing them into the action without their recognizing how and when. In the final analysis, we underline that the complexity of form arising from the above combinations represents the defining principle and major standard of value in judging the *Iri-Agha* as an artistic product of both theatrical and literary merit emanating from an indigenous people of eastern Nigeria.

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