

Dramatic Transitions and Scene Changes in African Traditional Masquerade Performance: A cursory look at the Ekine Masquerade Drama

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Abstract: Drama, as a universal human phenomenon, manifests differently across cultures, particularly in relation to the performance traditions of various peoples. The Ekine masquerade drama of the Niger Delta shares striking similarities with the Indian Kathakali dance drama, especially in its reliance on instrument sound to coordinate, control, and dictate the dramatic process. However, cultural distance and limited intercultural performance literacy have often prevented Western scholars from fully appreciating the dramatic nature of masquerade performances. This study adopts a qualitative research approach, drawing on both primary and secondary sources, and employs Richard Schechner's Performance Theory as its analytical framework. Findings reveal that the Ekine masquerade is a complete dramatic phenomenon, possessing all essential elements of drama; performance space, actors, and an active audience. Central to the production is the master drummer, who functions as an omniscient director; rehearsing the performers and coordinating, controlling, and dictating the flow of the entire performance.

Keywords: Drama, actors, audience, performance, sequential arrangement and masquerade.

INTRODUCTION

“Drama is an art ... and its performance a work of art. Art ... means skill in performance, which may be acquired through experience, study, or observation.” Directing, therefore, is a universal phenomenon that is practicable in all climes and cultures. Across human societies, the playing instinct of man is often expressed through dramatic performances, many of which manifest in the form of rituals, festivals, and sacred observances. These performances typically follow established modes, sequences, and patterns that require a sense of direction to maintain order and coherence.

Within masquerade performance traditions, particularly in African societies, the element of direction is embedded in the structure of the event. Each masquerade involved in a dramatic presentation, possesses distinctive drum-lore names through which they are identified during performance. The master drummer initiates these drum tones, signaling the entrance of masquerade characters and guiding their movements and actions. Through the rhythms and tonal variations of the drum, the drummer communicates what to do, how to do it, when to appear in the arena, and when to exit. At specific intervals, the drummer may also test the masquerade's knowledge of its genealogical roots, reinforcing cultural memory and identity.

Furthermore, the act of drumming becomes more than mere musical accompaniment; it constitutes the primary directing mechanism that coordinates,

controls, and shapes the entire performance. In this way, the masquerade drama emerges as a highly organized artistic form, where dramatic action is initiated, sustained, and concluded through an intricate system of sonic direction. In this direction, Emasealu (2020, p. 6) observes that “The history of theatre in Nigeria of which the “sequential arrangement of the performance” ... directorial practice is an integral part should be traced to the ritualistic traditions, storytelling, and ceremonies ... of different communities that make up this nation”. In this connection, Dean and Carra (1980, p. 24) assert that “the presentation of a play on stage for an audience interpreted both in terms of dramatic action and dramatic sound and in terms of the emotional and intellectual concepts of an author's script.” Which in a sense Brockett and Hildy (2010, p. 4) observe that ‘much that is found in ritual is also present in theatre... there must be actors ... and those who exercise control over the performance directorial functions often undertaken in the rites by initiates, elders, or priests’. Subsequently Schechner (1973, p. 6) corroborates this view when he says that:

Whatever the boundaries ... the performance that theatre takes place, and at the centre of the theatre is the script, sometimes the drama... and just as drama may be thought of as a specialized kind of script, so theatre can be considered a specialized kind of performance.

Based on the above information, Schechner has bridged the gap of misconception of performance modes by his theory deciphering various performance cultures of the world as fulfilling the same dramatic purpose. Schechner (1977, pp. 71-72), furthermore signifies that while theatre and performance are about doing, drama and script refer to the idea or record of the doing or what is done, and as such are more concerned with the written script ... drama/script is the domain of the author, the composer, scenarist, shaman ... 'while' theatre is the domain of the performers; the performance is the domain of the audience.

Actors in Egbelegbe Dramatic Performance: A Focus

In Egbelegbe performance, the chief drummer functions not merely as a musician but as a creative and interpretive artist. Consequently, the category of actors in the Egbelegbe dramatic tradition extends beyond the masked performer to include the chief drummer, the masquerade characters, and indeed the wider community. Men, women, chiefs, elders, boys, girls, and even visitors from neighboring communities all participate in various capacities. However, their roles are clearly delineated throughout the performance process. Visiting members of the Ekine society, for example, typically join the chorus of men and chiefs; while contributing to the collective vocal and rhythmic energy that supports the performance.

The masquerade actors wear masks that allow them to fully identify with the characters they portray. These masks communicate essential information to the audience regarding character type, age, gender, social status, and moral disposition. As it is common in many African masquerade traditions, female characters are represented by male performers. This is because, in most cases, women are not permitted by custom to wear masks. This convention is seen in the

enactment of Egbelegbe's mother, a female role performed by a male actor.

Central to the performance is the chief drummer, whose mastery of drum language shapes the dramatic structure. As Ikiroma-Owiye (2018, p. 187) notes that, the drummer plays a pivotal communicative role in disseminating information, directing movement, and mediating interaction between the masquerade characters and the audience. His rhythmic cues guide the swift and unpredictable movements of the Egbelegbe masquerade, whose knife-wielding gestures appear and disappear in quick flashes, often plunging the crowd into excitement and frenzy. Egbelegbe is accompanied by several supporting characters: the doctor (*Igwangi*), mother (*Sibi Imume*), police (*Sibi Nangolo*), and spy (*Afuru*), all of whom contribute to the narrative and ritual complexity of the performance.

Traditionally, Egbelegbe is performed once in a century, a rarity that underscores its cultural significance. In contemporary practice, this interval has been reduced to approximately two decades. The performance of Egbelegbe Alali offers numerous benefits to the Tombia community. This is because, it serves as a vital medium for cultural transmission as boys learn the roles and responsibilities of men, while women and girls learn their societal duties through observation and participation. The festival unites various social groups, bringing families together and reconciling individuals who may have been estranged. People eat and drink communally, reinforcing brotherhood, hospitality, and social cohesion. The spirit of generosity is heightened as visitors and strangers are warmly received. Ikiroma-Owiye (2018, p. 249) reveals that Egbelegbe Alali is not merely a performance but a cultural institution that strengthens identity, continuity, and communal harmony in Tombia.



Figure 1: The drummer performing during Egbelegbe masquerade festival

Dramatic Transition/Sequential Arrangement of the Performance: The Crux of the Master

In African traditional theatrical performance, the process typically follows fundamental directorial principles such as composition, movement, rhythm, picturization, and pantomime. These principles guide the arrangement of scenes and actions; while ensuring coherence and preventing disorder within the performance environment. In the Egbelegbe masquerade drama, these basics of directing are embedded within the indigenous performance structure and are executed through the sonic cues of the master drummer, who functions as the omniscient director of the event.

The sequential arrangement unfolds as the master drummer invites the masquerades into the arena one after the other. The characters never appear simultaneously, instead, each waits for its cue dictated by the chief drummer. During the entrance of each dramatic character, the principles of movement, rhythm, and pantomime are observed, allowing the performers to embody their roles in a visually and rhythmically coordinated manner.

Like poetic utterances, the chief drummer’s praises, exhortations, and drum lore must merge seamlessly with the principal drumbeats. These musical and verbal significance form a unified rhythmic pattern to which each masker responds creatively. Through these cues, the audience recognizes the identity and significance of each masquerade. Thus, the chief drummer serves as both artistic director and interpretive agent, shaping the tempo, energy, and visual composition of the performance. This arrangement Clark (1981, p. 77) refers to as “the orchestra and leader chorus arrangement of characters occupying as much a principal part in Nigerian traditional theatre as it did in that of classical Greek theatre”.

The Centrality of the Chief Drummer in Egbelegbe Performance Sequence

The Egbelegbe masquerade performance follows a clearly defined sequence in which the masquerades enter the arena individually and in hierarchical order. Once the performance space is fully prepared and the preliminaries have been completed, the master drummer performs the

initial invocations, calling upon the community’s deities, gods, and ancestral spirits. This ritual acknowledgement marks the formal beginning of the dramatic action. Thereafter, the chief drummer begins calling the drum-lore names of the masquerades one after the other. Each masquerade is escorted into the arena by a group of supporters, returning performers, or Ekine members who accompany them as they move around the performance space. Horton (2006, personal communication), confirms the chief drummer directorial function in Ekine drama in terms of directing that the drummer ‘dictates’ the tempo of the dance steps and in a sense the content of the play. The content of the dance represents the character of the play.

It is worthy of mention to state that the dramatic sequence typically begins with Igwangi, the priest-figure responsible for purifying the arena. Igwangi’s arrival establishes ritual order and prepares the space for the dramatic activities that will follow. In the next sequence, the drummer invites Sibi Nangolo, the crowd-control masquerade, who enters the arena to maintain order. He dances around the space, responding accurately to the drummer’s cues by pointing to the ancestral shrines referenced through drum language. After this ceremonial display, Sibi Nangolo resumes his function among the spectators, ensuring discipline and structured participation. As the performance unfolds, the drummer continues inviting the masquerades in ascending order of hierarchy. Each appearance is marked by rhythmic action ushers them into their role within the dramatic narrative.

The Chief Drummer Inviting the Masquerades to Perform

In the Egbelegbe performance tradition, the chief drummer, who functions as the omniscient director, invites the masquerades into the arena sequentially, following established ritual hierarchy. The first to be summoned is Igwangi, the priest of Simingi, whose role is to ritually cleanse and sanctify the arena. After this cleansing, other masquerades take their turns one after the other as they are guided by specific drum languages and tonal patterns.

Table 1: The Drummer Performing During Egbelegbe Masquerade Festivals

DRUMMER	DRUM LANGUAGE	ENGLISH
	<i>Igwangi igwangi Igwangj bereofori bo ti</i>	Iwangi there is no trouble come and play
	<i>Igwangi igwangi Igwangj bereofori bo ti</i>	Iwangi there is no trouble come and play
	<i>Bekin juen biodogi</i>	White man’s paddle search inside

	<i>Egwen simingi</i>	Child of simingi
	<i>Igwangj bere bere sibi tengele</i>	Igwangi trouble trouble strong head
	<i>Sibitekele</i>	Spin your head in response
	<i>Bu tekele</i>	Spin and turn around
	<i>Se siri binte</i>	The arena is full of spectators

Narrative Description of Performance Sequence

Upon receiving the chief drummer’s cue, Igwangi enters the arena from upstage left, responding to the drum language with rhythmic hopping and swaying: first to the right, then to the left. Afterward, he nods in acknowledgement of the Ajiowu shrine located downstage right. He then proceeds to perform ritual movements at significant shrines around the performance space:

1. **Simingi Shrine** - downstage left
2. **Idonobo Shrine** - upstage left

3. **Amatemeso (Creation Spirit) Shrine** – upstage right

At each shrine, Igwangi repeats the same artistic and dramatic gestures, cleanses the space, and symbolically re-establishes harmony between the spiritual and physical realms. Once this ritual circuit is complete, he exits the arena. With the arena now confirmed safe and ritually purified, the chief drummer proceeds to invite Egbelegbe, the fearsome and dominant masquerade, to commence his performance.



Figure 2: The Picture shows Sibinangolo, the Crowd-Control Masquerade Responding to the Chief Drummer’s Promptings

After Igwangi’s arena-cleansing sequence, the chief drummer who acts as the omniscient director calls Sibinangolo, the crowd-controlling masquerade, to enter and perform. Sibinangolo’s appearance is traditionally heralded by the Ekine members, who accompany him with chants and praise songs as he dances around the arena in harmony with the drum hints.

In the second sequence, the master drummer summons Sibinangolo again, this time to identify his people and assert his authority over the crowd. Sibinangolo enters, dances around the arena, and responds precisely to the drummer’s coded drum language by pointing to the correct ancestral shrines referenced in the rhythms. He is followed closely by his assistant, who supports the performance. After completing his ancestry recognition and ritual circuit, Sibinangolo exits

briefly. He later re-enters to perform his characteristic role which includes chasing unruly spectators, restoring discipline and maintaining order in the arena.

Transition to the Third Sequence: The Introduction of Afuru

After Sibinangolo’s crowd-control performance, the chief drummer initiates the third sequence by calling Afuru, the spy officer masquerade. Afuru enters the arena silently and moves stealthily among the spectators. His task is investigative as he scans the audience for any suspicious or inattentive individuals. In keeping with tradition, he may seize an item from an unsuspecting spectator. This is a symbolic act which is later resolved through a process of redemption or playful negotiation.



Figure 3: This is the picture of Afuru masquerade

Transition to the Next Sequence: The Arrival of Sibinume

Following Afuru’s investigative and mischievous performance, the chief drummer initiates the next ritual movement by calling Sibinume, the mother of Egbelegbe. Sibinume enters the arena

accompanied by her retinue of virgins and women, showing a shift in tone and ritual emphasis. Her appearance introduces maternal authority, ancestral dignity, and ceremonial grace into the performance, preparing the arena for the eventual arrival of Egbelegbe himself.



Figure 4: Sibinume performing in the arena.



Figure 5: Egbelegbe Performing Ferocious Dramatic Moves to Conclude the Annual Seasonal Performance.



Figure 6: The Egbelegbe Maidens Processing to have a Rest

This picture captures a serene and visually striking moment in the Egbelegbe performance as the maidens, who accompany Egbelegbe, retire temporarily from the arena after completing their ritual dance sequences. Their movement away from the central performance space reflects both ritual pacing and choreographic organization while allowing the principal masquerade, Egbelegbe to dominate the stage in the final ferocious sequence.

Egbelegbe's Grand Finale: Emergence from the Shrine and Ferocious Performance

The climax of the Egbelegbe annual performance begins when the chief drummer summons Egbelegbe to emerge from the shrine. The drum plays the tone thus:

- ❖ “*Tombiana Egbelegbe pakao*” --- meaning “Tombia Egbelegbe come out”
- ❖ “*Se siri binte*” --- showing that the arena is full of spectators eagerly awaiting his performance.



Figure 7: The Picture shows Egbelegbe taken into the Town Hall to Rest before the Final Performance

CONCLUSION

In the Egbelegbe performance, Sibinume, the mother of the harem, emerges as the true epitome of cultural authority. While Egbelegbe, the ferocious warrior chief, dominates the stage with his sword-wielding, aggressive movements, his actions are ultimately oriented toward ensuring the safety and honor of his mother and her harem. His dramatic entrance, heralded by canon shots,

indicating both his ferocity and his protective role. Upon finding no intruders, he engages in the sword-sharpening sequence and demonstrates dexterous movements, highlighting his martial prowess.

Sibinume's performance, in contrast, represents the teaching of culture and social values particularly the roles and comportment of women within the community. The performance

showcases the beauty and symmetry of the female body through her bare-breasted, rhythmically swaying dances, which are synchronized to the drum's tonalities. Through this, the audience is presented not only with aesthetic pleasure but also with moral and social instruction.

A unique aspect of Egbelegbe performance is the interaction of characters on stage, which contrasts with typical Ekine performances where masquerades appear sequentially, each taking a turn to respond to the drummer's cues. In Egbelegbe, however, Afuru (the spy chief) and Sibirangolo (the crowd-controlling masquerade) interact on stage while Egbelegbe and Sibirume perform, demonstrating simultaneous roles: Afuru patrols for intruders, Sibirangolo maintains order among spectators, and the principal masquerades execute their ritual and dramatic functions.

This layered, interactive structure underscores the complexity and completeness of Ekine dramatic culture. Understanding Egbelegbe requires an appreciation of its closed value system, hierarchical order, and ritual logic, as well as the symbolic interplay among masquerades, the chorus, and the audience. The performance is thus both a showcase of martial and aesthetic virtuosity and a living repository of cultural norms, moral instruction, and communal identity.

Recommendations

Having examined the dramatic transitions and scene changes in African traditional masquerade performance with a focus on the Ekine masquerade drama of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the paper puts forward the following recommendations thus:

- ❖ It is the modest recommendation of this paper that scholars and cultural practitioners should be encouraged to engage more deeply with African masquerade performances, such as the Ekine and Egbelegbe traditions, through interdisciplinary and intercultural studies. Workshops, collaborative performances and comparative analyses with other global performance traditions (e.g., Indian Kathakali) can enhance understanding and appreciation of these complex dramatic forms.
- ❖ The paper is of the opinion that given the rarity of performances like Egbelegbe, there is an urgent need to systematically document and archive these events. This should include video recordings, drum-language transcription, photographic documentation, and interviews

with performers and community elders. Such archives will serve as valuable resources for scholars, students, and cultural preservationists amongst others.

- ❖ As it were, the study demonstrates that indigenous directing mechanisms, particularly the role of the master drummer, are critical in shaping the dramatic process. To this end therefore, future research should explore how performance theories from non-western contexts can enrich global dramaturgical scholarship, complementing frameworks such as Schechner's Performance Theory.
- ❖ It is recommended that masquerade performances, especially those with strong pedagogical elements like Egbelegbe, should be leveraged as platforms for cultural education. Schools, cultural centres, and local communities can incorporate structured observations and participatory workshops to transmit cultural norms, values, and historical knowledge to younger generations.
- ❖ In the context of this study, it is observed that the practice of male actors portraying female roles highlights gender dynamics in traditional performance. On this note therefore, the work recommends that further research should investigate the social, cultural, and performative implications of gender representation in masquerade dramas, exploring how these practices influence societal perceptions of gender roles.
- ❖ The work is of view that communities that host unique masquerade performances could be supported to develop culturally sensitive tourism initiatives. Properly managed, such initiatives can provide economic benefits while maintain ritual integrity and protecting the spiritual and cultural significance of the performances.
- ❖ Finally, the paper recommends that comparative studies between African masquerade traditions and other global performance forms (dance-drama, ritual theatre, etc.) could uncover universal principles of performance as well as cultural specific nuances. This could enrich both performances studies and cross-cultural dramaturgy scholarship.

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