

THE PERFORMANCE OF CULTURAL IDENTITY AND RACE IN A TECHNOLOGICAL SPACE: IWA-AKWA CEREMONY OF UMUEZEALA AUTONOMOUS COMMUNITY AS PROTOTYPE

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Abstract

Ndi Igbo in Nigeria as a race is imbued with different cultures that are celebrated and performed for different reasons. These reasons are either for the appeasement and propitiation to the gods for a wrongful act, as a thanksgiving to *Ahiajoku* for a bountiful harvest; as a rite of passage to the great beyond; as a mark of honour for achievement and/or an initiation into manhood amongst others. Thus, communities in Igbo land are identifiable with one cultural festivals or the other and this has continued to serve as a clear demarcation between them and their neighbours. Before now, these cultural festivals were performed in their primitive and raw state without much alteration and embellishment but the advancement in technology has altered the way most of these cultural festivals are celebrated and performed. This is the case of *Iwa-Akwa* ceremony of Umuezeala Autonomous Community in Ehime Mbano Local Government Area of Imo State. This paper therefore, through the use of historical and observational methods, and anchoring on the theory of technological determinism, examines the current technological wavelength in the world and how it has affected the celebration of the event. This is against the backdrop of the fact that technology has revolutionized the world and almost everything man does, including cultural celebrations have been influenced by it. It is the opinion of the writers that modern technology has drastically influenced the festival in terms of its accessibility, communicative

nuances, visual appeal and acceptability. The paper therefore concludes that the sustenance of, improvement on and constant modification of these technologies is key to the continued survival of the festival as a cultural identity of Umuezeala people.

Keywords: *Performance, cultural identity, technological space, Iwa-Akwa and Umuezeala*

Introduction

Culture is all ramifying and it has a multi-dimensional approach and definition. Culture means many things to many people. It underlines our very existence as a people and pervades every facet of our lives. In the words of Ekwierhoma (4), it covers “everything a human being does, plans to do and does not do”. It means everything including dances, folk music, folklore, their history, arts and crafts. It includes also their commerce and industry, laws and customs, their medical theory and practice, their games, their celebrations, ruling ideas, mythologies, proverbs, philosophy, modes of production, social relation and even religion. In other words, culture is dynamic and the culture of a people is said to reflect their thinking, dress, food and speaking patterns. It takes into cognizance their values, languages, beliefs, norms and tradition, customs and names which have been transmitted from one generation to another (Egbung 62). These cultures provide a wealthy resource from which society and human beings draw explanations of issues and obtain answers to their questions... and authenticate their activities, beliefs and matters of historicity (Uko, 1). Again, Pappas and Mckelvie (12) see culture as the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music, and arts. Thus, culture can be seen as the growth of a group identity fostered by social patterns unique to the group. Indeed, culture is not static, it is dynamic; being a way of life and circumstance of life, being evolutionary, and culture is necessarily evolving (Isa 9). The implication of this comprehensive definition of culture is that no meaningful discussion about any set of people can be complete without a reflection of their culture. One of the principles that form the nucleus through which our forefathers lived and undertook their activities depended on their response to our culture whether as an Igbo man, Yoruba or Hausa. Culture gives identity to a people especially its aspects of life and it is a dynamic process of growth (Isa, 10). Culture is therefore, society’s racial badge...and no race is too backward or too uncivilised not to have its own particular cultural outfit and corresponding artistic and aesthetic sensibilities (Umukoro 19).

Cultural identity refers to the complex and multifaceted ways an individual perceives and defines himself in relation to his cultural group membership. It encompasses various aspects including shared values and beliefs, customs and tradition, language and communication, history and heritage as well as social and community ties. According to Payne (2), cultural identity is derived from the term “culture” which is the totality of the way people live in society. Bala (24) goes on to say that cultural identity is a social construct; it refers to values, beliefs, norms, expressive symbols, practices, and artifacts upheld to develop the social relationships experienced throughout life. Cultural identity is that aspect of culture that makes individuals conscious of themselves and defines their unique personality in comparison to others. Furthermore, Radwan (4) avers that cultural identity refers to the identical compound of reminiscences, impressions, ideologies, images, idioms, inventions, and ambitions that maintain a human set’s civilizational identity within the framework of what it knows of developments due to its internal dynamism and its ability to communicate or give and take. Relating it to the arts,

Okeke (13) affirms that culture and the arts have always been sources of peoples' identity as exemplified in the Noh theatre of the Japanese, the bronze sculpture of Igbo Ukwu, the Argungun fishing festival of the Hausa and many more. Undoubtedly, cultural identity is often expressed through cultural practices and tradition such as customs, rituals and festival celebrations. Conversely, identity is the sum total of the unique characteristics and conditions which distinguish an individual, object, place or situation from all others. Identity confers on the individual, object or place or situation some form of exclusive singularity which makes the individual, object or place or situation stand out amongst others (Omoluabi, 75). One of the parameters for such singularity is cultural festivals.

Cultural festivals come in different forms. In the words of Duruaku (8-9), it has been noted that:

Nigerian festivals cover an enormous range of events, from harvest festival to bethrotal festivals, to the investing of a new chief and funerals...to those that are for ancestor veneration and deity worship...there are also festivals of the feast of the farming circle, festivals of rites of passages (coming of age) like those involving initiation.

Festivals are organized to depict the culture of a particular geographical space on a specific given time which contain cultural identities that make the people appreciate their cultural heritage and the way their fore-fathers lived as well as to be connected with their historical and cultural roots (Abba and Abubakar as quoted by Enis and Azorbo 87). According to Duke and Osim (5), festivals are commemoration in nature as they celebrate events, deity, common identity of the people in a spectacular manner that bring together those who are directly or indirectly committed to them. For Anigala (7), festivals are regular features in traditional African community that derive their origin from the cultural and religious practices of the people. As such, they are organised around nature forces, deities, divinities, supernatural events, myths and legends. Again, Duruaku (35) sees festival as an indispensable element of a society since without it, individuals will lose view of their roots and identity. He goes further to state that:

A festival of culture would therefore refer to that group activity which springs from the people; for culture is commonly sourced from the people and it is original to them; learned from the forebears and transmitted, accumulating and accumulated. It may become modified with time but does not lose its base-wellspring of the people, their common experience that binds them closely. In this respect, culture becomes an identifying feature (Duruaku 8, 11).

These festivals and cultural identities are performed in a designated place involving elaborate preparations and jocundities.

Ndi Igbo in Nigeria as a race is imbued with different cultures that are celebrated and performed for different reasons. These reasons are either for the appeasement and propitiation to the gods for a wrongful act, as a thanksgiving to *Ahiajoku* for a bountiful harvest; as a rite of passage to the great beyond; as a mark of honour for achievement and/or an initiation into manhood amongst others. Thus, communities in Igbo land are identifiable with one cultural

festivals or the other and this has continued to serve as a clear demarcation between them and their neighbours. Before now, these cultural festivals were performed in their primitive and raw state without much alteration and embellishment but the advancement in technology has altered the way most of these cultural festivals are celebrated and performed. This is the case of *Iwa-Akwa* ceremony of Umuezeala Autonomous Community in Ehime Mbano Local Government Area of Imo State. It is therefore the aim of this paper to examine the nature of *Iwa-Akwa* as a cultural identity of Umuezeala, and how the current technological wavelength has influenced its celebration.

Theoretical Backing

Technological determinism is a theory that suggests that technology shapes and controls society and human behavior. This theory argues that technology is the driving force behind social and economic change, and that society adapts to the technology that is available to it. Technology like media can determine the outcome of what happens to people and society, hence the name (Terrence Finley and Holderman, 1). The proponents of technological determinism argue that the society is influenced and shaped by technological development. It has to adjust and adapt to new technologies and innovations (Hauer 1). One of the main assumptions of technological determinism is that technology is an autonomous force, meaning that it has a life of its own and is not shaped by social or economic factors. According to this view, technology shapes society and culture, rather than the other way around. Critics of technological determinism argue that this theory is overly simplistic and fails to take into account the complex ways in which technology and society interact. They argue that technology is not a neutral force, but rather is shaped by social and economic factors, and that technology can be used in different ways depending on the context in which it is used. Some also argue that technological determinism is a form of technological fatalism, as it suggests that we are powerless to resist the effects of technology on society and culture, and that we must simply accept the changes that technology brings. In reality, the relationship between technology and society is more complex and interactive. Technology does shape society and culture, but society and culture also shape technology. Key proponents of technological determinism include sociologists and economists such as Thorstein Veblen, who is often credited with coining the term, and Marshall McLuhan, a media theorist who argued that media technologies shape human behavior and social change. Other significant figures associated with this theory are philosopher Karl Marx, American sociologist Clarence Ayres, and William Ogburn. However, it has to be stated that while technological tools transform festival execution as it is the case with *Iwa-Akwa* ceremony of Umuezeala, the community still retains the agency over the core cultural values and how such cultural values are to be shaped by the emerging technologies.

Performance of Cultural Identity in Historical Perspective

Culture is a universal concept and its universality entails its permissiveness and permissibility in every aspect on man's being whether in the primitive era or the contemporary times. Both the Greeks and the Romans are often regarded as the centre of modern civilization. These are as a result of the very many things they invented and which have remained indelible markers in the cultural evolution of their city states in particular and the world in general. Indeed, the cultural identities of the Greeks and Romans are complex and multifaceted, shaped by their history, mythology, philosophy, art and values.

The Greek tragedy and comedy, as well as Greek art and architecture showcased the Greeks' love for beauty, proportion and harmony. The Greeks are known for their mythology and religion and with its pantheon of gods and goddesses, their art, literature and daily lives were influenced. The Greeks were also known for their competitive spirit which manifested in the Olympic Games and other athletic competitions. Again, Greek language and literature, such as the works of Homer, Sophocles, and Euripides played significant roles in shaping their cultural identity. Furthermore, Greeks identified with their city states such as Sparta and Athens which had distinct cultures and values. The Greeks also valued knowledge, philosophy and intellectual pursuits as seen in the works of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

The Romans valued practicality and efficiency. These manifested in their engineering, architecture and administrative systems. They also had a strong law and governance, including the Twelve Tables and the Roman Senate. These contributed in shaping their cultural identity. It is instructive to note that Roman military conquests and expansion, as well as their military organization and tactics were indices that defined their cultural identity. Romans also valued civic duties, patriotism and loyalty to the state. This is exemplified by figures like Cincinnatus and Cicero. It is also on record that the Romans were known for their engineering and architectural prowess. The building of aqueducts, roads and buildings like Colosseum showcased their technical prowess. In all, both the Greek and Roman cultural identities have had a profound impact on Western civilization including Nigeria, influencing art, literature, philosophy, law, governance, values and culture.

The Performance of *Iwa-Akwa* as a Cultural Identity of Umuezeala

Umuezeala is an Autonomous Community in Ehime Mbano Local Government Area of Imo State. There are two festivals the community is identified with. One is the *Mbom-Uzo* (New Yam) and *Iwa-Akwa* (wearing cloth) festivals. *Iwa-Akwa* is a compound Igbo word made up of (a) "Iwa" meaning in English language to "wear" or "wearing", (b) "Akwa" meaning "cloth" or "garment". In the combined form, *Iwa-Akwa* has to do with wearing cloth. According to Mbano normative concept, *Iwa-Akwa* literary means wearing cloth. This by no means implies that the celebrant has been naked all the time, only to wear cloth during this ceremony. Rather, this expression in Mbano traditional nomenclature has different connotations. They include an expected age of the celebrant that inherently informs the level of both physical and intellectual maturity of the young man in question. *Iwa-Akwa* cultural festival therefore means the periodic joyful communal celebration of the practice of "clothing" of young men of ripe age in Umuezeala Autonomous Community in Ehime Mbano Local Government Area of Imo State. *Iwa-Akwa* as a cultural festival is symbolic. It signifies a stage at which young men are deemed well-cultured in certain ideas, beliefs and behaviour associated with human social development, maturity and advancement. Until a young man performs the *Iwa Akwa* rites, he is regarded as a minor in the custom and tradition of the community.

The *Iwa-Akwa* ceremony, before now, took place every four years but recent developments especially as regards the number of riped adults potentially qualified for the wearing cloth ceremony; it has now become a triennial event. As a cultural emblem of the community, it guides every member of the community to understand when he is considered mature and accordingly should behave as a responsible adult. In traditional perspective, the celebrant is considered to be customarily weaned from one's parents, of which he is being expected to get married to a girl and establish his own family and therefore remain less

dependent on his parents; a clear cut indication of transition from exuberant freelance youth to responsible adulthood.

In Umuezeala, this celebration has assumed communal dimension. It climaxes with the public presentation of the set of young men who qualify for graduation to adulthood each triennial year through a parade in the open, or procession at the community market-place, *Ukwu Achi* Umuezeala which serves as the traditional event arena. According to Osuagwu (15), it has to be observed that while the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) regards age 18 years and above as attainment of adulthood (full age) in the country (Ref: cap III, S.27, par. 2 (a) and S. 29 par. 4(a), this performance of *Iwa-Akwa* ceremony marks the attainment of adulthood in the custom of the people of Umuezeala. The chronological age normally ranges between 30 and 35 years. At this age, a young man is expected to have matured physically and physiologically, intellectually and occupationally and is knowledgeable in custom and practices of the community. He at this stage of life, is deemed competent to earn a living, build and run a family, lead a group, kindred or other organizations; participate in discussions, defend his rights and those of his fellowmen and rise to any challenge in defense of his fatherland, physically, intellectually and otherwise.

Technology and the performance of *Iwa-Akwa* Festival

Technology is a product of man and its primary function is to assist man in solving daily problems. It is not antithetical to development. Rather, its conscious application not only reduces workload and stress but also improves productivity, technical know-how and aesthetics. Today, we can quite confidently say that the nature of new media has fundamentally changed the structure of the society. The expansion of computers, networks and the Internet has radically changed many aspects of not only human communication, but also the entire society's life. The rising popularity of new media has changed the nature and the way our society and the individuals act – the way we do the shopping, recruit staff, pay taxes, use the library, gain academic degrees, educate ourselves and celebrate our cultural identities. Abdullah (5) affirms that:

Technological innovations have reshaped how individuals and communities engage with cultural traditions and construct identities. The integration of digital tools into everyday life has democratized access to cultural knowledge, enabling broader participation in cultural preservation and expression. Digital platforms allow marginalized communities to share their narratives and traditions with a global audience.

Before now, the *Iwa-Akwa* ceremony of Umuezeala were performed in their primitive and raw state without much alteration and embellishment but the advancement in technology has altered the way this cultural festival is celebrated and performed. These are noticeable in the following areas:

In its previous celebrations dating back to thirty (30) years downwards, local Dane guns were used by the initiates to announce their arrival and readiness for the event. During the period, the initiates will line up in a military formation with their Dane guns primed ready. When the instruction comes, they will, one after the other, rent the air with their guns. Again, during the

procession and carnival at *Ukwu Achi*, (the central arena for the event), each initiate adorns his Dane gun which he will at different intervals, shoot in the air and hands over to his brother or friend to refill and keep ready for another shooting escapade. However, over a period of time, there is modification in the technology of the Dane guns. The era of forming military formation with their Dane guns no longer thrives. A new technology in the form of canon shots was introduced. With the technology of canon shots, new initiates no longer come to the procession arena with their Dane guns. Rather, an arrangement is made with the person responsible for the canon shots to line them in designated places, and have them fired; first at the commencement of their procession and secondly, when they are through with the procession. The beauty of this technology is that the risks and hazards associated with it is minimal compared to the Dane guns which, in the process of refilling it, irritates the eye and most cases creates panic when it locks and refuses to fire.

Again, its on record that during the olden days, people wear suits for the ceremony with all the attendant heat and sweat, perhaps because it was what was in vogue and much more respectable at the time. However, the revolution in textile technology and its attendant change in clothing also revolutionized the type of cloths worn during the festival. These days, the initiates are no longer dogmatic about suits but are comfortable with anything they fancy. These make them to be free and flexible during the carnival enegagement at *Ukwu Achi*. Again, the flexibility in modern textile technologies makes the cloths discardable after use. However, some of the cloths can be kept for future use and this is dependent on the nature of the material, the sewing and the individual involved.

Music is another area where technology has had an impact in the festival. It is an irrefutable truism that music is an inalienable resource in traditional festivals and events. What makes music much more important in the festival is because it involves individuals with different taste and class. In its traditional and olden form, local drummers and flutists were contracted to lead the new initiate to the procession arena. This may be done singularly or in groups. Again, individuals may carry their double-deck radios on their head or shoulder and dance along with it whether it is playing or not. Today, the improvement in musical equipment has also positively influenced its application and desirable outcome on the festival. Individuals now hire live bands with state-of-the-art technology and engage known artists with creative artistry in the making of music to play for them. With these sophisticated technological musical instruments, the aesthetic undertone of the ceremony is heightened and raises it far beyond mere cultural engagement to that of communal bond and revelry.

The advent of mobile network technology has, without a doubt, revolutionised the viewing experiences of ...audience (Evwierhoma, and Agoha 63), and also created a huge drift away from the traditional stage culture where the viewing audiences must physically be present in any cultural event, to the screen culture where mobile-internet-driven-devices are the major source of accessing entertainment among the younger generation of audience, resulting to a change in taste and access to the cultural and festival experiences. To say therefore that mobile phone technology has revolutionized the way participants enjoy the festival is to state the obvious. Because of this new technology, people in Diaspora now stay in the comfort of their houses and watch the online streaming of the event. With the mobile phones, the on-the-spur-of-the-moment action is engendered. This is even more beneficial to those in Diaspora who ordinarily are supposed to be part of the process but because of one reason or the other, could not

be available. In that case, one of their sisters is expected to adorn the cloth on their behalf. So while the festival is going on, the person relieves the moment at home with his mobile gadgets. This digital medium, according to Stebner et. al., (2), allows individuals to feel like a part of a community and culture, despite the lack of a physical location. With this mobile technology, it can be viewed on Twitter, Facebook, Tiktok, Instagram, and most content creators now develop contents with it thereby showcasing the community to the world and attracting more participants. Apart from the online streaming of it, pictures are also taken which could be electronically sent and received while the action is still ongoing.

The nature of the festival demands that guests, friends and well-wishers should be feted after the ceremony. And this happens in the houses of the celebrants. Before now, palm-fronts and raffia palms were used to provide shades for visitors. Today, canopy as a new form of technology has taken centre stage. This technology has continued to evolve to accommodate more sophisticated and aesthetically appealing dimensions of it such as the tents. These tents can accommodate up to three hundred persons or more with of course, the new seats that go with it. More so, the technology in preparing the *Ugba* (oil bean) has also improved. As against the local calabash (*oku*), and local drinking jug (*okuku*) that were synonymous with the celebration, emergent technological equivalents are now being used. It is however important to state that some of those old technologies have not eroded completely, but emphases are now placed on the new technologies which of course, have added more value and beauty to the ceremony.

Technology has also provided an avenue for the event to be recorded and retrieved at will. There is an archival system at the individual and community level where recent events of the festival are stored for reference purposes, especially, when there is the need for it. This is made possible with the advancement in storage facilities such as MP3, flash, computers, discs and other forms of electronic storage devices. The importance of these digital devices and their impact in the propagation of our cultural identity is summed up by Zemmouri (2011) who asserts that “digital media portrays a mirror through which cultural identity can be seen in a society, this is showcased in modern technological development which has produced new virtual areas of interaction, resulting from technological developments in social networks that have transformed reality into circles of daily developments.”

Conclusion

Culture and technology are not antagonistic to each other. They share some sense of commonality and goal which is to ensure the continuation of life, improve human performance, recreation and entertainment. Radwan (8) argues that:

Technology (digital media) and cultural identity are both residues of society. They form a platform through which individuals develop social relationships, and build and strengthen culture and experiences in life, and it has revolutionized the communication and identity of individuals, providing unprecedented podiums for individuals and communities to express their unique cultural identities.

Just as culture is dynamic, technologies also keep changing in order to accommodate the changing nature of cultures and vice versa. Culture defines people and a people of culture

therefore are those who clearly understand the etymology of their existence and identity; leveraging on the technology at their disposal to advance their course. Here, technology becomes an apparatus, a tool for embellishment and not a modifier of the culture itself. Cultural identity remains sacrosanct to the people while technology influences the celebration and outcome of such identities. Indices in festival performances have shown that technology is a constant indicator to the success of cultural festival celebrations and *Iwa-Akwa* ceremony of Umuezeala is not different. Indeed, technology is in a constant state of flux and as long as performances are concerned, be it traditional or modern, it will continue to influence the way festivals and performances are celebrated and performed. Therefore, *Iwa-Akwa* ceremony of Umuezeala has benefitted immensely from the technological wavelength currently being witnessed and its survival and aesthetic appeal rests in part, to its continuous acceptance, adoption and modification of these current and evolving technologies to align with the culture of the people. Anything short of these, is not in the best interest of the festival.

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