

Women as Iconic Paradox The Ebira-Ekuechi Facekuerade Performance Example.

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Introduction

Ebiraland occupies a hilly sketch of guinea savannah grassland approximating 2,977 square kilometres.¹ The land lies approximately between 6° and 8° north of latitude and between 6° and 10° east longitude in the south-west zone of the Niger-Benue confluence area with a very pleasant climate (Mohammed 1). To the west and north-west, it shares common boundaries with the Yoruba speaking people of Owe, Akoko, Ijumu and Oworo; to the south and south-west, it is bounded by Ogori, Ososo and other Akoko-Edo settlements; the Hausa, Nupe and Ebira groups at Lokoja are bounded to the north and the River Niger to the east. To be found across the River are the Igala and Bassa Nge. The word Ebira refers to the people themselves (or could be called *Anebira*), their language, their character and their geo-political location (*et'Ebira* or *et'Anebira*), when considered etymologically.² Beyond these,

The land is, however, more than a matter of territory: it is also a metaphysical or mystical entity capable of having an effect on people's lives and receiving sacrifice. The land is, one might say, a force to be reckoned with. (Picton 68)

Ekuechi festival of the Ebira Tao of Kogi State in Nigeria is anchored on ancestral celebration and interaction. The

performance process entails the celebration of myth, legend and traditional social events. It is observed annually by the people to mark the end of the year and usher in a new one. It is a two-day/night affair with a preceding eve (*Unehe*) which usually starts in late November, runs through December and ends in early January with each Ebira community choosing its own date as affirmed by the priest of *Ireba Eku* (masquerade cult) shrine, the *Ozumi* especially.

Ekuechi performance is a men-dominated event from which women are forbidden to watch or participate, but have covert roles that are tangential to the festive essence of ekuechi. Their overt exclusion is essentially to prevent them from apprehending maskless masquerades in their ancestral manifestations. It is around this masklessness of masquerades that Ododo (2004) conceptualises the *facekuerade* notion. This paper therefore interrogates the origin story of Ekuechi and the vital space women occupy in it as well as their iconic essence in the performance design of the festival. This effort is essentially to contribute to the contemporary discussion on women and gender ambiguity from the perspective of the Ebira. But first, let us position the *Facekuerade* notion.

Facekuerade Concept

Across cultures in Nigeria evidence abounds of masquerades that do not don masks but are expressly called masquerades. Some examples can be found in Yorubaland, such as the *Oloolu* of Ibadan and *Jenju* of Abeokuta. Others that exist in Yoruba-speaking areas of Nigeria include *Okelekele* masquerade of Ekinrin-Ade in Kogi State; *Melemuku* masquerade of Oyo town, *Atupa* of Ilora, both of Oyo state; *Olukotun* masquerade of Ede, *Komenle* of Agba and *Akereburu* of Owu all in Osun state. Reacting to the Ebira maskless stock, Husaini (148) actually questions the application of the word masquerade “since not

all masqueraders use masks.” Beyond raising a nomenclatural problem, an investigation of the context and content of their performance realisation could lead to some interesting revelations, just as it is intriguing that masquerade can be conceived without a mask; a fundamental feature of the masquerade art. Ekuechi festival is our reference point of discourse is this essay.

The star masquerade performer at Ekuechi festival, *Ekurahu* (Night Singing Masquerade), does not wear mask as well as *Akatapa* (Jester) and *Ekumahete* (feet stamping Masquerade) do not wear masks. The *Ekuechichi* (Rubbish Heap Masquerade) and *Ekuechise* (Soothsaying Masquerade) that perform during the day fully masked in Echane festival also participate in Ekuechi maskless. The absence of masks notwithstanding, they are all still referred to as masquerades. Adinoyi-Ojo (89) submits that “the night has masked them from women and children to whom *eku* is supposed to be a mystery”.

From all the foregoing, it can be conjectured that the concepts of mask in masquerading art transcends the physical object of concealment. Night (darkness), voice disguise, pseudonyms and fear have become potent masking factors that sometimes de-emphasise the use of proper masks, the root word for masquerades. The mysticism that surrounds the masquerading art reinforces the image of a masquerade character without a mask. It is for these reasons; we believe that the use of the term masquerade for a performer without a mask has to be revisited. This is precisely what has informed our own term and concept of '*Facekuerade*'. The words Face, Masquerade and Ekuechi, all contribute to the formation of the **Face – Eku – rade**. The organising key of the new word is Eku which accounts for why the word is not spelt as Facekuerade.³

Facekuerade therefore refers to a performance masquerade character without mask. Even though his audience encounters him face to face, the spiritual essence of the masquerade character is not devalued. He is still revered and held in high esteem. *Facekuerade* is an engaging metaphor in action capable of transforming events, performance realities and even mediates between structures of social systems.

Within the framework of Ekuechi 'masquerade' ensemble, all the participating 'masquerade' characters without masks essentially project the facekuerade essence. The awe and mysticism that surrounds these unmasked beings as masquerades are the disguising elements of the piercing sound of *izeyin* and *ireha*, guttural voice, tongue-twisted renditions, esoteric chants and weird sounds verbally produced by *Agadagidi* (stick-carrying masquerade) and some participant-audience. All these elements help to heighten the masking reality of the *facekuerade* characters. *Ekurahu*, being the star actor of the Ekuechi event, forms the epicentre of the *facekuerade* concept. *Ekurahu* is a composite actor who wears ancestral face; speaks, sings, dances and acts in that spirit. The respect that the custodian of *Ekurahu* attracts also signifies that his character as *Ekurahu* is taken far beyond his real self. Because of the ancestral connotations, his utterances during the Ekuechi event are taken seriously.

It is therefore useful that masquerade characters can transform into *facekuerade* characters because of the general caution people now take in approaching whatever they do, knowing that the ancestors have human agencies that can chastise them for their iniquities during Ekuechi performance. It is in this sense that the Ekuechi Festival has been perceived as *facekuerade* performance.

Origin Traditions of Ekuechi

Generally in Africa, theories of autochthonous origins for masquerades are often propounded through oral traditions as Horton (1963), Adedeji (1969) and Njaka (1974) demonstrated in recording the myths that established the origin of masquerades in Kalabari, Yoruba and Igbo cultures in Nigeria respectively. The Ebira example is not too different.

There are few accounts of how *Ekuechi* concept started. However, the differences in these accounts are not fundamental. Generally, *Ireba Ekuechi* (masquerade cult) was believed to have been formed under the divine instruction of God to check the excesses of women, apart from serving as a medium of ancestral contact. Myth has it that after creating man and woman as husband and wife, one day God sent for the man but he was too busy to honour the call. Instead, he requested his wife to heed God's call on his behalf. God gave her *Irakwo* (an egg-like object that contains the secrets of life and has the capacity to manifest supernatural powers) for her husband. Having discovered its contents and being fascinated by them, she hid it in her uterus and later swallowed it without giving it to her husband. She thereafter became quite powerful, performing supernatural feats like turning into any animal and changing back to a human being. She could instantly grow wings to fly around in astral travels, and also capable of all sorts of mysterious transformations. Her husband became envious of her powers. In sympathy, God enabled the husband to create the *Ekuechi* masquerade cult from which women membership is strongly discouraged, as a counterforce to the powers the women possess.⁴ Corroborating the notion of *Ekuechi* as a counterforce to witchcraft, the Adeika of Eika, the traditional Chief of Eika clan in Ebiraland in an interview recorded by Adeiza submits that:

Eika is the senior clan in Ebiraland and Ekuechi originated from them. The real origin of the festival is a traditional secret and I wonder whether I should reveal it. Well, well, I will... Ekuechi originated from necessity, for when witchcraft crept into Ebiraland it was the women who reigned supreme in the cruel craft and they cheated us men by it. Many people were being killed by them especially men. In retaliation, we men also set up the *Ekus* cult to dread the women. Women are made to believe that *Ekus* who perform during Ekuechi are ancestor spirits raised from the dead to come and admonish, warn and punish evildoers in their songs and ritual. (cf Adeiza, 1994)

Ibrahim (12) further corroborates this position by revealing that “the masquerade executed recalcitrant women (witches)”. This is one of the major reasons women’s participation in the night performance of *Ekurahu* is highly forbidden. According to Ogunba (24):

In many African cultures women are not admitted into the secrets of the masking art; indeed, they are often the favourite target of masking and satirical ridicule, the assumption being that they live a more poetical life than their menfolk, have secret powers, are more of spirits than human beings, and therefore an object of fear or veneration.

A more encompassing conceptual thought on this phenomenon of female exclusion from masquerade cults within the African patriarchal context resides in the understanding

that women are feeble-minded and cannot keep secrets. Also, because

They are also mysterious and sometimes unclean. They cannot therefore approach these ancestral manifestations, whose character is diametrically opposed to their own. Any meeting between them would have adverse effects on both parties. Much harm would come to the women and masquerades would lose something of their virtue. (Nzekwu 132)

Women’s association with witchcraft, misfortune, pollution and impurity is not peculiar to the Ebira alone. In South Africa for instance, a Bantu group called the Ba-Rongas subject their widows to a series of intensive purification rites to “throw away the malediction of death” (Juniod, 1962). The Ode-lay masked performers of Freetown in Sierra Leone “protect the maskers from witches” by dusting their costumes with special medicinal substance (Nunley, 1987). Also, the Franciscan monks of the Thirteenth Century addressed women as “the head of sin, a weapon of the devil, mother of guilt, corruption of the ancient” (Tavris and Offir, 1977). In New Zealand, there is the general belief among the Maoris that when a woman “enters the area in which a sacred boat is being built, the sea worthiness of the boat is affected and it cannot be launched. The presence of a profane being serves to remove the divine blessing” (Caillois, 1959). Several of such ill- perceptions of women abound in most cultures. Some of the reasons usually advanced are hinged on the desire of men to dominate women; as a result, anti-social labels are heaped on them. The other reason is informed by the unclean aspect of women imposed by nature, like the menstrual cycle. On this count alone, women are forbidden from most religious rites, be it Traditional, Christianity or Islam.

The Ebira hold very strong view about this too. In their belief, potency of charms can be neutralised if a menstruating woman comes in contact with it. Sometimes, for certain ritual observances, one is strongly advised to avoid any carnal relationship with women no matter their state of purity. Many of them are aware of these injunctions and also sometimes capitalise on them to taunt men, test their strength of character and ability to resist seductive advances in such sanctimonious state. Oftentimes, the weak will easily fall prey and get destroyed in the process. The Biblical story of Samson and Delilah is instructive here.⁵ All these make obvious, women's evil essence and underline why they are feared and distanced from sacred matters.

However in some cultures, it has been established that women masking traditions exist. In Angola for instance, there are the *Ganguela* female masquerades (*facekuerades*) that don no masks. Their faces are sometimes painted but their identity is unconcealed. Some specie of female masquerades is also to be found in Kabompo district of Zambia (Guimoit, 1998). The Sande association masks offer a unique illustration of women as masked performers in Liberia and Sierra Leone by the Mende, Vai, Sherbro and Gola communities (d'Azevedo 1973; Jedrej 1976, 1986; Phillips 1978). In Nigeria, apart from some conventional female masquerades like the popular Gelede, the Bereke of Ijumu in Kogi state, Sagore and Ilebi female masquerades of Oyo town in Oyo state, a somewhat masking ambivalence occurs in some cultures where female gender denies men access to their masquerade performances. Bettelheim (49) records that among the Ejagham of Cross River State, masquerade is not only about masking but there are also unmasked mystic powers that are equally potent as masked essence. The women of the Ekpa-Atu association in the area "use their nakedness" to "affect male potency in the same way

that men's masquerade can affect women's fertility." This rear phenomenon occurs in the threatening naked dance in the night in which anonymity does not depend on the wearing of mask. Relying on oral account by Atabo Oko, Amali (59) writes that

from the Yoruba Iludun-Ekiti of Ondo State comes the strange report of an existing women's sacred society which is not seen by men. When they appear at night for performance, men run into hiding...behind their doors throughout the night.

From the different submissions cited above it is observed that most women masquerades lack serious spiritual depth. The import is more social than spiritual, while they perform mostly without a mask, the key essence of masquerade art. They are therefore more of *facekuerads* in features than masquerades.

In modern times, women are beginning to pick information here and there on the secrets of masquerading without being participants. Nevertheless, men cannot boast of a fair knowledge of witchcraft, which is still the edge they have over men till today. Even though Osadebe (109), using the Igbo masquerade art as a reference point, has remarked that:

Since the women understand the basic background of the mmanwu, what was truly guarded, or rather upheld, was the women's lack of the right to publicly discuss the mmanwu.

But in Ebira society, it is not just the public right of discussion that is withdrawn, also the right to conscious quest for knowledge. The mysticism surrounding the *Ekue* (masquerade) cult is still intact, for previous attempts to neutralise it have always met with stiff mystic and physical

opposition from custodians and a cross-section of Ebira people who believe strongly in the inviolability of such cultural practices.

According to oral and several written accounts (which are also sourced from orality), Obaji and Ododo, sons of Itaazi, were said to be the progenitors of *Ekuechi*. These were two brothers who constantly antagonised each other on account of seniority contestation. But seniority was generally conceded to Obaji, and Ododo was not pleased. One day, Obaji took ill and was about to die. His brother, Ododo, said he would not like Obaji to be his senior here on earth and again be his senior in the great beyond (*Idaneku*). Ododo then decided to change his identity with his dying brother. When Obaji died, Ododo put on the costumes of *Ekuechi* and the women were made to believe that Ododo rose from the dead. So, Obaji became the senior of the living, while Ododo became the senior of the dead in the world beyond. *Adega*, a prophesying masquerade character who specialises in the chants of historical events, myths and legends, gave a similar account in his 1983 annual Echane festival performance:

Ozi Ododo vana si ozi Obaji dosi mo nyi ehi ni
Ijo ozi Obaji vasa ka yo ozi Ododo
Ka ani ewun ma ze ada anini
Do ozi Ododo va se so ka ine hi ni
Do Ododo ka Obaji ana vo zoku yoni ehononi
Dore vana ve ozoku idaneku yo ni
Di Ododo wusu ni
Da hure Eku ni
Ihe gwo eta ani do Obaji oni re wu suni (*Adega*,
1983).

Translation

Ododo's son took Obaji's daughter for a concubine

When Obaji's daughter told Ododo's son of her father's illness,
Ododo's son went home to relay the information
Ododo in envy opined that Obaji who is his senior in the human world
Will again be his senior in the world beyond (*Idaneku*).
Therefore, Ododo passed on before Obaji.
His Children made *Ekuechi* out of him.
The third day, Obaji also passed on...⁶

Another account holds it that Ododo did not actually commit suicide but that he actually donned the masquerade costumes at his supposed funeral, as he was never publicly interred. But we are not told how the mask character was later reconciled with Ododo's living identity. However, in a very recent study, Ibrahim (10) explains that

The main event behind the story was the crowning of their foundation of Ebiraland with their title taking and installation as priest-king and high priest of Ebira Ancestral Temple.

The system of king-making in Ebira land of olden days

included establishing the ancestral temple as point of contact with the ancestor and from where the *ekuechi-oba* (ancestor incarnate masquerade) would emerge; symbolically passing through the various stages of 'dying' rounded up with the preparation of *ekuechi-oba* and then *ekuechi-echichi*, a ceremony for sending off departing elder's spirit to its new abode, or for escorting visiting ancestral spirits back to their world. ...once the funeral ceremonies and outing of the

masquerade had been performed, that was the end of the public appearance for the priest-king or person concerned; these ceremonies would not be performed again when he actually (physically) passed away. The priest-king was never reported as dying for the man had already 'died' before he became priest-king. (Ibrahim 10-11)

It is based on the above understanding that Ibrahim (10) reasons that it was when Obaji had already passed through some of the 'death' processes that Ododo became aware and because he was averred to Obaji becoming his senior in the world beyond, Ododo "by passed some of the processes straight to 'death' and outing of masquerade to personate his spirit".

All other accounts slightly vary from the ones recounted above but they provide scanty information that leave them raising more critical questions than they were meant to resolve. An attempt to answer one question raises another. Adinoyi-Ojo (66) for instance queried that, if Ododo and Obaji were brothers, "the disagreement over age should not have arisen in the first case." This position is plausible if they are brothers from the same mother, but Adinoyi-Ojo fails to consider the possibility of their being half- brothers with different maternity, a condition that can account for their delivery on the same day at very clinically short intervals. Ajanah (10) actually dates the origin account, putting it at 1730 assertively without any source. This coming from a young man in 1990 without a credible source raises serious doubt on the authenticity of such claims. The inference one can draw from these numerous traditions of origin is that because the original oral source is far removed from the present age, the account has been retold several

times and passed through numerous hands to the extent that it has lost so much details and acquired new ones to remain alive. So, variants of this account are probably as much as the number of talebearers and writers on the *Ekuechi* origin because the focus of everyone seems to be the desire to be different and not necessarily to strive with some amount of empiricism to engender a fair degree of certainty on *Ekuechi* origin. What is certain however is that *Ekuechi* with its mysterious manifestations is located in the domain of the dead as masquerading motif. Ibrahim (15) earlier argued without empirical substantiation that

Ekuechi existed as an institution before Ododo and Obaji but it was neither well organized nor disciplined. Ododo and Obaji, brothers in ideas, reorganized it.

Probably on the strength of this submission, Adinoyi-Ojo (72) reconstructed what he calls "the **ekuechi's** path since the 15th century when Ebira were said to have left Wukari" through this way. Thus:

Before 1400 A.D Ebira and Igala exist as part of the Jukun ethnic group, and participating actively in the cultural life of the group, including the masked rituals.

1400 A.D.:

Ebira and Igala progenitors leave their ancestral home, Wukari, for Idah with acquired beliefs, myths, cultural, and religious practices, including the knowledge and practice of masking. As they pass by and interact with groups along the route from Wukari to Idah, they pick up some of the cultural symbols and practices of these enroute-

groups while also leaving them with some aspects of their culture. At Idah, where the Ebira and Igala lived together for over 300 years, these cultural practices and symbols are remoulded to address the realities of their new environment.

1750 A.D.:

Ohimi leads his people out of the Igala kingdom arriving at Opete with a culture that has elements of the cultures of the Jukun, of groups along Wukari-Idah route, of Igala-Ebira at Idah, and of societies along their Idah-Opete route. Again at Opete, this culture is further repackaged to suit the prevailing circumstances and to meet the demands of the new environment.

1800's:

A group of Ebira people leave Opete, cross the confluence, and settle north-east of the confluence region at Igu and Panda, bringing with them a culture that is a composite of their experiences and those of their ancestors since leaving Wukari in 1400. This culture, including **eku**, is later reshaped and tailored to the needs of the new surrounding.

From this reconstruction, Ododo and Obaji are clearly omitted but he proceeded in the later pages of his work to itemize what he considers to be the reforms instituted by Ododo and Obaji as earlier contended by Ibrahim (1976). Picton (184) ascribes part of these reforms to Itemireje. This claim however ran into crisis of historical validation as Picton himself sincerely admitted:

The night festival clearly has an antiquity within Ebira tradition that is impossible to determine; and the night singers are the focus of attention, or at any rate they are nowadays. However, it was generally acknowledged that the first person to gather people together and sing during this festival was someone by the name of Itemireje. He did not invent the festival. But he did invent the role of singing *eku* as part of it...Then, to my surprise, I found that some old men remembered the performances of Itemireje, and how they differed in style from those of today. That put the invention of this kind of entertainment to within the past hundred years, but I gave up testing this discovery on people – its logic was always flatly denied: they had always done it; it was what they came to meet their fathers doing, and so forth. (184)

This approach of looking at the origin of *Ekuechi* is dangerous for the historical reality of the masquerade concept and the people. Caution needs to be exercised in matters like this; otherwise vital aspects of a people's collective history may be inadvertently wished away. Ibrahim himself could not be categorical on what *Ekuechi* looked like and the reforms the two "brothers in ideas" brought to bear on it. If they actually reformed the *Ekuechi* performance art, what evidence exists for locating the starting point of this reform at Opete as Adinoyo-Ojo has reconstructed, and not at Bira where Sa'ad Abubakar through recent researches has maintained that Ebira at this period were a distinct group in terms of language and group formation even though they shared common boundaries with the Jukuns, as already posited earlier in this chapter. Obayemi's

(163) affirmation that “in the area of ancestor personification, the Igbirra (Ebira) have certain pre-eminence as founders of a cycle” of masquerades (*eku*), could also be a suggestion that as founders, other nationalities from the Jukun down to the confluence region copied the masquerade art form from the Ebira. While not denying the dynamism of cultural interactions with attendant influence, it is not likely that the founder of an idea would undertake an elaborate process of reorganisation on the same concept. Cultural reorganisation is a gradual process that does not occur in one fell swoop.

Adinoyi-Ojo himself has even detailed out so much changes that has visited and affected the features and structure of *Ekuechi* performance within the last forty years. It is not conceivable that these new reforms are in tune with what Ododo and Obaji reorganised. It is therefore presumptuous to ascribe the re-organisational responsibility of an important phenomenon as *Ekuechi* that coordinates the people’s way of life to two individuals. Many factors bordering on intercultural relations, environmental reality and changing social norms come to crucial play in a matter of cultural reorganisation. It evolves over time with cumulative transformational additives from an original point. Therefore, the issue of progenitor cannot be wished away. If the supernatural powers accorded *Ekuechi* phenomenon as manifested in various masquerade characters is anything to go by, then their proclamations should not be doubted. If this position is sustained, the declaration of Adegba (1983), and indeed many other oral sources, that Ododo and Obaji are the forerunners of *Ekuechi* should not be questioned any further. Whatever argument we may want to raise, it would not be fair to rob these two “brothers” their positions in history, for they may possibly have started the *Ekuechi* from the beginning of time at Ebira. In fact, Ahmadu (61) is categorical that “Ododo was the originator of “*eku*” cult in Ebiraland.” We should always be

reminded that “living with unresolved questions is part of life; forcing an answer to a question, for the sake of an answer, on the basis of inadequate evidence feels dishonest and lacking in integrity” (Burnell 25). What remains constant however is the continued association of Ododo and Obaji with the *Ekuechi* phenomenon either as progenitors or reformers, and the fact that among other things, it was primarily instituted as a counterforce to witchcraft, the secret and terrifying domain of women.

The Iconography of Ekuechi Performance

The key icon in most masquerade performances is the **mask**, but this is absent in *Ekuechi* performance. Paradoxically, it is the mnemonic (extra-terrestrial) value of the mask that contextualises and defines *Ekuechi*. The *actual absence* and the *virtual presence* of the mask in *Ekuechi* is what Picton (183) describes as a redefinition occasioned by “common knowledge about events and performers”. Another point to note is the absence of another vital icon in *Ekuechi* celebration – **women**. The important space women occupy in Ebira cosmology has been established in this paper. They are the repositories of *Irakwo* (witchcraft), an elemental equipoise to *Ekuechi* (masquerade). They also weave *Ekuechi*'s costume, clean the surroundings, household and the inner chamber in readiness to receive visiting ancestors; they prepare the feast with which the ancestors are hospitably received, yet their *presence* is negated by the *absence* of a mask. Picton (66 and 75) reasons that this ambivalence is designed to sustain the “trickery, even deceit and certainly play-acting” involved in *Ekuechi* (masquerade) – “a matter of dramatic pretence” that establishes overt (male) pretence in response to covert (female) reality” (80). Picton’s position can be regarded as argument of academic convenience for dramatic appropriation and scholarly discourse; otherwise

the *Ekuechi* phenomenon is not just a question of wilful suspension of disbelief for women but a force that commands unusual sensibility. The name alone can cause “stampede and create commotion”. Picton (88) conveys this sense when he suggests that “the powers of *ekuechi* drive women indoors confining them physically and metaphysically”. He concludes in another related context, that “evidently, whatever else *ekuechi* might be, it is a word with the power to move people” (Picton 87). It gathers and disperses people, it flavours and frightens, it treats and threatens; on the whole, *Ekuechi* galvanizes and dispels action. Considered differently, women’s invisible participation is an assigned role in the performative design of *Ekuechi*. As in theatre practice, no one is expected to abrogate his/her role regardless of what he/she thinks of it. To abrogate one’s role is to tilt the balance of cosmic harmony. Nevertheless, the *Ekuechi* event fortifies itself against such abrogation and also has the mechanism of reconstructing itself for continuity of performance. For instance, when a woman violates her role by taking a wrong cue to appear on the performance arena, the chthonic realm reacts with death strike – either instant death of the body and soul or ‘death’ to the woman’s psychic system, disabling her from recounting what she has seen. In this instance, it is untenable to depend on “phantasy” and “deceit” in defining the role of women but “reality” and “faith”. However, what is compelling is the philosophy that hones the understanding and acceptance of the women folk that *Ekuechi*, and indeed other *facekuerade* characters are sacred. Women also know that their role do not include direct contact with these characters.

The critical question now is that, does the absence of the mask completely negate the presence of women? Our proposition is that, just as the ancestral essence finds expression in *Ekuechi*’s performance in the absence of a major

icon of the mask, so is the woman essence foregrounded in virtual reality. The fact that *Ekuechi* must, of necessity, involve certain class of women in the performance design for spiritual support, praises them in his songs, and that at some difficult moments (when for instance an *Ekuechi* may not find his voice again or loses stability as a result of evil attack from the spiritual network of other competing *facekuerades*) ‘women of means and divine sight’ are brought physically on stage under protective custody of the henchmen to resolve the crises, eloquently substantiate our claim of the presence of women at *Ekuechi* performance. Picton (1988:75) even records that “strong women are there only you don’t see them”.

Conclusion

All considered, even though the iconic ambiguity of women participation in *Ekuechi* performance is obvious, but as a theatre form which is an art of dissembling, women’s role in the performance design cannot be wished away. Their energies and functional space in cultural matters in Ebiraland are vital quantities in the scale of balance that sustains equity and justice amongst the people.

Ekuechi therefore is as rich as the syntactic and semantic endowment of the Indian Kathakali dance theatre, and also exudes a performative design that extols inherent communicative codes that make it accessible and delightful: the name *Ekuechi* conjures for Ebira a sensibility of transportation and mingling with their ancestors; other iconographic deployment like gong strikes, vocal contortions, impulsive stampedes, waving and intimate association of some hand props (fans, brooms, baskets, etc), hand clapping, feet stamping, the songs, *akatapa*’s invectives and banters, poetic invocation, chants, drumming, whistling, fluting, horn trumpeting, etc all creatively integrate to establish an unspoken

aesthetic convention.

The ritual essence of Ekuechi is firmly rooted in the fact that it is not an enactment but a celebration of a living experience with virtual existence foregrounded in the chthonic. To enact is to imitate or recreate from a body of previous knowledge, while the "celebration of a living experience" is an action that constantly draws from a people's cosmic view of life presenting a unique experience each time the action is produced. As a co-ordination of the temporal and spiritual essences, Ekuechi breathes a life of its own and maintains organic structure. *Ekuechi*'s performance during the Ekuechi event is therefore both a text and a meta-critical narration of philosophies as well as interpretation of cosmologies to humanise the society. Functionally therefore, Ekuechi anticipates Schechner's (171-172) definition of social and aesthetic drama. In both, transformation of participants and transformation of the consciousness of the audience are respectively substantiated. Relying on the above axiom, we perceive Ekuechi as a socio-aesthetic performative experience that can sustain contemporary theatre utility and the equilibrating force of women is a social fabric that must be carefully tailored.

Notes

1. NAK Lokoprof: 301 Annual Kabba Province, 1952. This is in contradiction with Adinoyi-Ojo (1996:30)'s un-referenced claim that puts it at about 80 square kilometres north-east and south-west of the confluence of rivers Niger and Benue. The Picton's (1974) map that he refers us to does not present this detail. I therefore opted for the colonial record.
2. Over the years, the name of this people are variously spelt as "Igbira", "Igbirra" "Ibira" or "Egbira" until 1974 when it

was formally corrected and gazetted to read "Ebira" by the then Kwara State Government. This development was the fallout of the "comments at the general conference" of Ebira People's Association (EPA) "held at Okene in December 1973" which also led to I.P.A (Igbirra People's Association) "changing to E.P.A" (Ibrahim 39). It is this new form that is adopted in this study. However, the former varieties of spellings are retained in quoted passages. Wherever they occur they refer to the same people.

3. Please see Ododo (2004) for detailed morphological analysis of the word formation and the theorisation of the facekuerade concept.
4. The seriousness with which witches (*opochi*) are derided for their evil deeds further forces the Ebira society to invoke certain sanctions on them. Picton (352) records that "from the point of view of individual women, open accusation of witchcraft did no one any good at all: indeed the consequences, once upon a time, were terrible; for the convicted *opoci* would be hacked to pieces. I was given several accounts of this, all more or less as follows: "If someone died saying that such-and-such a woman was the witch who was killing him or her, the elders would gather at *orere* (a village meeting place, used for masked performance, as well as for meetings of elders). The woman would be brought, and the elders would question her. They would ask if she was the one that killed the deceased, and she would answer 'no', the elders would ask her if there was ever a time she had quarrelled with the deceased; and if she answered 'yes' they would condemn her. Five *ekuecici* would come and remove their masks. The singing of everyone present would drown her cries of *oza v' eku ni*, masquerade are people. Four of the *ekuecici*

would hold her, each taking a limb, while the fifth cut her into pieces with a cutlass. The body would be buried at the cross roads and a *Dracaena*-palm planted over the grave. "I have no idea how often this happened, nor do I know the last time..."

My attempt to crosscheck the above story revealed that punishments to confirmed witches with terrible conduct were severe and often ended in banishment and outright elimination. The Ohindase for instance, confirms in an interview with this researcher that...

Any woman that performs anything that is too terrible like continuous death of prominent and promising individuals in a household is usually handed over to Eku to eliminate. First, a confirmation ritual is performed to ascertain that truly the suspected woman is guilty. Once certain, the elders invite her and hand over to masquerades who then lead her to a far place for elimination. This practice served as a security mechanism to check the excessive powers of women through supernatural means.

5. Samson, a Nazirite whose head a razor must not touch, in a moment of emotional ecstasy revealed this secret to Delilah, his lover. She in turn disclosed this to Samson's enemy, the Philistines, who came and overpowered him, plucked out his eyes and imprisoned him. The details of this story can be found in the Bible under the book of Judges 16:4-31.
6. The translation is mine. Versions of the Ododo and Obaji story as the founders of *Eku* were recorded in N.A Office File in 1946, Lannert (1964) and Husaini (1991).

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