

# **Theatre and Anthropology in Amo Runzu *Iyani* Farming Festival of North Central Nigeria**

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## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the theatrical and anthropological aspects of Amo Runzu Farming festival with the aim of unearthing its aesthetics. It is a festival that has existed since time immemorial and has started losing its substance and significance as a result of lack of documentation. Farming festivals in Africa that are theatrical have not received meaningful attention from writers/ critics in validating the aesthetics that such festivals offer the artistic space. This paper utilizes anthropology in the style of Turner and Schechner to validate the salient and critical aspects that Amo Runzu *Iyani* farming festival gives out for analysis. Anthropology and ontology touch on social relations and culture, and the nature and relations of being. The paper attempts to answer questions through a narrative style of presentation, such as: What is *Iyani*? What are the performance idioms in *Iyani*? How can *Iyani* be more beneficial in a contemporary competitive artistic space of today? An idiom is a language that is peculiar to a people but theatre has a way of mediating through any activities that are spectacular and have the potentials and vivacity of appealing to other people transcending their sociological and traditional audience spaces. This paper uses a sociological approach in investigating *Iyani* festival in order to evaluate the substance that is theatrical and anthropological in the festival. Consequently, the paper will be of benefit theatre practitioners and anthropologists.

**Keywords:** Theatre, Anthropology, *Iyani*

## **Introduction**

Festival theatre the world over is one area that seems to be gaining more and more attention from writers, critics and oral performance experts. This is because it offers fresh air to theatre field with aspects that were

either not known before or accepted as part of the theatre. These aspects were not part of the theatre tradition found in Europe and America.

Mwai (2012) posits that drama in Africa has been in existence since time immemorial. That is because it is known from birth to death, Africans have a myriad of rituals in which drama was and still is enacted. Drama is performance and in the African setting performance remains an integral part of every such activity.

Mitchell (2006), in his compendium of historical collection that covers all regions in Africa attests to the fact that the continent is rich in several festivals that are highly ritualistic and theatrical. Examples of such festivals are the initiation ceremonies of the Maasai from the Eastern Africa; the myriad Yoruba festivals that celebrate gods; the masked Chokwe ritual ceremonies of Angola to the Central Africa, to the Xhosa initiation ceremonies of South Africa and the Shilluk of the Sudanese people. Africa has remained a hive of the traditional activities that are performative. “Panafest in Ghana celebrates Pan-African identity. It attracts people with Ghanaian roots from all over the world and incorporates traditional ceremonies such as initiation, music and dance performance and dramatic events. Argugu fishing festival is also a recent festival that started in 1934 to mark the first visit there of Sultan of Sokoto. It is today a four day festival (Mitchell, 2006).

Brockett and Ball (2011) state that Europeans and Americans largely were ignorant of African performance traditions until the twentieth century. But nevertheless, African performance activities had through the centuries been numerous – religious rituals, festivals, ceremonies, storytelling, and various kinds of celebrations – and had been woven into daily life.

In the same vein, Olaniyan (2011) points out that Africa is home to several traditions of theatre, conceived as an ensemble of culturally marked and consciously staged practices in space and time and before an audience. Many of these traditions are of ancient origin, while others emerged with the formal European colonization of Africa in the nineteenth century and the subsequent imposition of western education, religion and culture. He further explains the nature and form of these performance traditions as mostly non-scripted, improvisatory and performed in indigenous African languages.

Finnegan (1970), despite writing in the twentieth century, argues on the contrary on the non-dramatic form of these performances. This is because they do not fit into the mould of European traditions. Exponents of this position, like her, are mindless of the relativity of drama which must not be monolithic as cultures are not the same.

Iyani Farming festival falls within the category of indigenous practices which Olaniyan (2011) describes as organized around certain deities or spirits, or mark generational transitions or the passage of the seasons whether of climate or agricultural production. He opines that festivals are sprawling multimedia occasions which imply incorporating diverse forms such as singing, chanting, drama, drumming, masking, miming, costuming and puppetry. Iyani takes a place within a day or two days.

It is anthropological to assess the nature of existence of a people in terms of cultural history which at the same time gives the need probe into the nature and relations of their being of this particular set of people under study.

### **Relationship Between Theatre and Anthropology**

In performances by Euro-American, Native Americans, Afro-African and Asians, etc., Richard Schechner has examined carefully the details of a performative behavior and developed models of the performance process useful not only to persons in the art but to anthropologists, play theorists and others fascinated (but perhaps terrified) by the multi-channel realities of postmodern world. The relationship between theatre and anthropology can be seen from a number of stand points. Barber argues that theatre anthropology is the study of the performer's scenic behavior which constitutes the basis of different genres, roles and personal or collective traditions ([www.odinteatret.k/research/ista/theatre-anthropology.aspx](http://www.odinteatret.k/research/ista/theatre-anthropology.aspx)). In this paper, we are not going into that highly technical area in the performer's different techniques that is looked at as being conscious and codified in which recurring principles are applied to certain physiological factors like weight, balance, the position of the spinal cord etc. In this paper, the concentration is on the application of some certain paradigms of cultural anthropology to theatre and dance. Ours here is more of anthropology of performance than theatre anthropology because our

focus is on performative phenomena in Iyani farming festival. By this approach we would see the relationship between theatre as performance behavior and ritual. This is exactly what Iyani is endowed with.

### **Narrative on Iyani Festival**

Iyani is a farming festival of the Amo Runzu people that starts at the beginning of a farming season. Iyani is practiced by a part of the Amo people and are mostly in Jengre town of Bassa LGC of Plateau State in Nigeria. History as reported by Baba David Awuya, has it that Kundi came and made Runzu in Jengre and the two became brothers. Today, they are a combination of two clans that emanated from these two forebears.

When the Amo Runzu settled at Kalambai hills from Pingel, he began to fashion out implements he was using on the farm locally. For instance, the metal for the hoe he was using was not manufactured with a modern metal. This reminds one of science and technology that are traditional to Africa. They would collect the assorted earth that had iron ore and subject it to heat and it would become metal for the hoe and other implements. The metal that was homemade was called kuduza.

Amo Runzu people placed primacy on supernatural and spiritual powers. They had charms to protect their farms with. Thus, such charms were even used to settle land disputes around Jengre and environs. The people were made to swear by the charms and the repercussions were immense.

The same charm is used when the season is about to start. The chief priest comes to the land with it and squats in the middle of the farmers who are waiting for a great indication. If after the charm is laid on the ground and covered with a calabash, remains horizontal, the ridges and the festival will not be successful.

Amo people are predominantly farmers, specializing in the cultivation of Maize, Millet, Yams, Beans, Soya beans and vegetables among others. But the farming festival is usually done on a maize farm because it usually covers hectares of land. At times, the event or performance takes place on a soya beans farm.

As the farmers cultivate the ridges, drum and other musical instruments are used to give them the Iyani music. Drums and local flutes

are also used for music renditions. These are used in creating the tempo and atmosphere of the event. The farmers' strides, gaps of moments they cut the soil have to match with the beats of music or the emphatic sounds of the flutes.

At such moment, the height and the beauty of the ridges are taken into cognizance. The farmers are usually competitors and the atmosphere is that of competition. According to a respondent, Samson Gada, the winner of such contest is rewarded with a beautiful lady who is usually among the ladies at the venue of the "Iyani".

There is usually a horn hanged between two sticks that are perpendicularly placed. This objects usually enchanted are believed to provide shield to the farmers in case 'unseen' enemies are to launch an attack.

The people of Runzu Amo have animistic and totemistic affiliations to the objects of spiritual relevance. Most objects are attached meanings and are believed to bear power that can influence events.

Costumes worn during Iyani look like those one used in Izara; the women wear leaves with string-like objects beside the leaves. Their faces and bodies are scarified or marked. The men wear tanned skins of dead animals with their chests bare. But for the female participants, they wear short black apparels to cover the breasts. The women usually wear armlets (Imon-chara) and necklace made with multi-colour beads (Imon-toh). It is like that in Izara festival and other major festivals of the entire Amo tribe, the tanned skins are decorated with African cowries (Ikulma) which make their costumes beautiful.

At the venue of the farming contest, foods such as *tuwo* and *mbampin* (foods prepared from maize) *Iwaja* or *Ichikapa* (rice meal) and *ntoro* (locally brewed beer) are brought there for the consumption of the farmers. They take a lot of the local brew which makes them stronger.



Fig.1.1 Winner of Iyani farming contest of 2015



Fig.1.2 Farmers/contestants presenting the winner of the contest of 2015



Fig. 1.3 The bride given to the winner of 2015

### **The Meeting Point Between Theatre and Anthropology in Iyani**

Theatre thrives on the aspects of audience, performers, place and action. The four must assemble themselves for a theatre experience. Where one is missing, there is no theatre. The action that is presented must be spectacular as opposed to ordinary life. The audiences come together for something unique and special. Iyani as a performance has its spectators who are active at times. They do not relax and watch a play flow like in the case of Western audience. But these audience's senses are engaged at all the time during the performance.

What does anthropology offer Iyani or the performance generally? Theatre is cultural and ontological. It depends on materials from a society's cultural milieu to furnish what is watched. It provides substance for the script that is performative at the same time.

Anthropology captures the beliefs and customs of a people. This deals with the aspects of human life that are non-physical yet they are quintessential to human existence as encapsulated in their belief system. Iyani is not just about the execution of labour on a farmland by a large number of farmers, but it is one the ways the people invite or attract their ancestors come to bountifully bless their agricultural produce. And a way to celebrate hard work, strength, belief which attracts a reward of a suitable woman for marriage for the best competitor in the farming contest.

Iyani usually has a lot of spectators because people from neighboring villages of Amo usually get to know about the event and attend it. It usually has a good number of women both married and unmarried. For the married women, they have witnessed several editions of the festival and they were beneficiaries of it. This is because a lot of them got their spouses during the festival. For the beautiful spinsters, they are usually anticipating productive suitors to ask for their hands in marriage. The song sung at such rare contests is known as "turmi shadakan mata" directly translated as "mortar, the impression of women". This has to do with the skillful dancer who dances and lifts a heavy mortar with his mouth without the help of his hands, usually impresses the women who cheer him during the dance.

The rich people in Amo land would buy a cow and invite farmers for the contest. He invites the flag man also known as "unan tuta" who

moves with flag hanged on a long bamboo stick to show that Iyani is taking place. At the Iyani festival venue, some warriors also hold bow and arrows to keep guard against enemy camps who might want to invade or infiltrate Amo Runzu land and take the people into captivity.

If the best farmer/competitor is selected to lead in the next five years, he is presented to the elders for anointing. He is presented to the elders in front of the rich man's house. The local chief welcomes the farmers back from the farm. For (2015) edition, Wada Ezekiel was the winner of Iyani, and he would lead for the next five years. The winner is known as 'barde'. According to Wada, his ridge was the best and he finished before any other competitor. That he had been planning for the competition, and he had gone through the development stages to enable him feature in this competition. For five years, he knew what was expected of him. If the winner emerged, it was usually time for the celebration.

This discourse on anthropology and theatre also gets attracted to this issue of religion and magic becoming two central phenomena in Iyani festival which contribute to its identity and viability.

Since every African society has both magic and religion, it was inevitable to conclude that Africans had not evolved beyond the stage of detaching religion from magic. Magic belongs to the religious mentality of African peoples. But religion is not magic, and magic cannot explain religion. Religion is greater than magic, and only an ignorant outsider could imagine that African religions are nothing more than magic". (Mbiti, p.289)

It can be agreed that magic is not the same as religion and it does not portray the long standing features that the latter has in terms of what it has stood for, but magic does add to its attraction. Human beings are attracted to what is catchy, what attracts so much attention. Religion is spectacular despite the reverence, humility and pastoral credence it preaches. Contemporary religious practice has passed this limit of character. Iyani competition does not just entail who tilts the most beautiful ridge but who also does it the fastest. Some people believe that there is usually a spiritual battle that ensues among the competitors and



the prospective winner heaps obstacles in form of stones that clash with the local hoe of the competitor. This 'misdeed' slows down the pace of the competitors and frustrates them into giving up on the contest.

Iyani festival thrives on restored behavior in that it deals with actions that are from the catalogue of everyday activities of Amo people. Amo Runzu are predominantly farmers who live communally. So what is Iyani is the performance of activities that have been restored. They are disjunctive actions that have been restored to the delight of their ancestors and for the benefit of the community. The performers have cherished these actions and they usually look forward to it at a moment of Iyani.

No step of the process can be skipped. But be that as it may, for the fact that no human activity which is spiritual, ritual or profane is static, Iyani too has been tinkered with.

Ritual is what makes the Iyani festival unique. Ritual is central to traditional African festival theatre. Ritual itself gets modified through time. Kanhailal (2008) posits that:

We are disillusioned with the spirit of the times. We reject the clichéd and often-made claims that nothing can be changed. Ours is an entirely different kind of awareness, reflecting on the past and present. The importance of our work consists in that we have breathed new values into the empty shell of theatre. Therefore, we believe in distilling new meaning from the social report, which is theatre. We believe in such production that can shelter the way of seeing and doing theatre.

The above quote captures the essence of this paper, that the theatre as a discipline and profession still has slim space to be filled with vistas of production. How much the ritual reaction has offered contemporary practice another direction of this paper. Unless the theatre and if possible film in Nigeria, take such a direction, we will lose it all in monotony and lack of variety. We will even lose it in trying to promote what is ours. Theatre ought to connect a people's past with the present. For instance, Soyinka became very prominent in the 1960's to 1980's because he took a direction that was new. He was idealistic, ritualistic and social in trying

to carve a niche for Nigerian theatre and drama. His plays have picked substance and materials from the traditional repositories of the Yoruba people. Soyinka attempt in dramatizing Yoruba festivals and synthesizes them with serious aspects of their mythology. Blau (2008) posits that theatre is the art of impossible. Artists have not ceased to be iconoclastic by trying new things, some unconsciously if we go back to Schechner's concept of restored behaviours.

### **Performance Aesthetics of *Iyani* Festival**

#### ➤ **Dance**

Dance as a performance aesthetic in *Iyani* implies the tonic which invigorates the farmers to work hard and fast. The female dancers dance *Iwawa* which are some diagonal movements. They make two steps to the right and one to the left in a cycle. But during the farming contest, they sing and dance to cheer the farmers while showing their beauty.

#### ➤ **Music**

Music during *Iyani* is always that of supplication and thanks giving for the current year's bountiful harvest and for the previous year. Music in *Iyani* performs the same purpose as in *Izara* circumcision festival. It is myth-embryonic. It is what the ancestors/ gods understand, according to Baba David Awuya. They sing with the accompaniment of the beats of the drums.

#### ➤ **Costumes**

The costumes are leaves (*agwaw*) and black apparels for the female performers and tanned skin (*Kukii*) for the male performers. The women wear some fabric to cover their breasts. The tanned skins are usually decorated with African cowries or buttons.

#### ➤ **Ritual**

Every stage in *Izara* is done carefully and correctly. Every stage is done with reverence though there is so much of dance and music. All performers must adhere to every rule that applies to the performance and activity of *Iyani* festival. Rituals keep the festival still relevant and in good structure even though modernity has had its impact on the festival.

➤ **Audience participation**

African performance space is fluid. There is no clear dichotomy between performers and audience. It is a festival that has so much relevance to the life of the community, so every willing member participates in the dance in supplication for a better harvest or farming season. But the dancers/farmers and the drummers are more active other ones.

➤ **Farming contest**

Farming contest is the reason for the festival. The beauty of the season is combining farming activity and dance/music to the delight of the participating audience. The winner is guaranteed longevity and a woman to be married to him.

➤ **Properties**

The properties used in every stage add colour to the event. The effigy-like objects at the beginning, the drums, the local brew, the bows and arrows held by the guards, etc add beauty to the whole event.

### **Contemporary Relevance of *Iyani* Festival**

As we have established above, no human activity is static and so is African traditional festival. No aspect of it is untouchable by dynamics of time. Time searches for new meanings in new places. So time moves motifs, symbols, signs, movements etc. to such new places or art forms. Today, highly ritualistic performances belonging some ethnic nationalities have been transported to Europe and America like the Ikeji festival of the Igbo of Nigeria, a masquerade that has performed severally in New York and Washington D.C. Although there are changes done to the festival, the philosophy and belief remain the same. The same masquerade is seen with same costume, and he dances the same way in his full masculinity. The change remains that not enough personnel and logistics are deployed when it comes to the performances of Ikeji in New York.

For Iyani the narrator keeps saying that a lot has been missed in this course of history. An event that should be annual was not held for a long time despite its potency. Could it be that the people's existence has

been overtaken by other events deemed more germane? According to Baba Awuya, Iyani holds the key to the bountifulness of the people's harvest or it symbolizes "plenty". Until the gods accept such reverence from Amo land before crops can yield plenty. The music and dance that accompany the event carry the spirit of the movement. Soyinka contends that in such African festivals, music is myth-embryonic. The essence and meaning are carried to the ancestors and the gods through music.

In contemporary terms, the observance has become more of a ceremony for other tribes within the region to see. It is more or less political. It is an avenue of getting finances for the conduct of communal projects. The dances have de-ritualized, music has been desecrated; its essence is more or less lost to modernity. Today, we witness how multi-purpose cultural troupe have veered and ventured into hitherto "secure" traditional performances adopted recklessly the artistic aspects of a people's performances. Where this imitation, transposition and adoption are done, the audience does not connect with the original owners or abode of such quintessential performances. No dance, ritual movement or music is sacred in the hands of such purveyors of sacred codes. But that is the position of the phenomenon of postmodernism; it mixes several sorts together in a single artwork/ performance.

What has happened to the identity of owners of Iyani festival? This question has to do anthropology which deals with the nature of the existence of tribes and cultural events that define them. Amo people with regard to identity have to be redefined considering their present belief system. Most of them have become Christians and a few Muslims now, and Iyani is observed ceremonially, not as an event that used to determine how well and successful the people existed. The young people probably see the event as being distant from their existence because Christian beliefs oppose what Iyani stands for. In the case of Izara circumcision festival, it now accommodates people from other tribal extractions. They join in the dance and sing Izara song which captures the spirit of the race. Iyani looks strange to other tribes probably because it belongs to a region of Amo

### **The Future of *Iyani* Festival**

The best way to view the future of a festival that is in decline is to see it in good light. Vital aspects of the highly revered event are being lost in the swamp of modernity. To salvage the situation is to utilize the materials it can provide for film and theatre, and to also absorb its substance in other areas that are memorably based. For instance, museums can collate some of the properties used during the festival to be stocked in their galleries.

Theatre has been utilizing information and materials gathered from the traditional milieu of the Nigerian communities. However, there are rich and resourceful traditional festivals which are still untouched. Dramatists have often utilized interesting aspects of these festivals to dramatize them. These dramatists should majorly pick the performance idioms to dramatize. A dramatist like Wole Soyinka picked from the Yoruba tradition from tradition of the carrier to pitch his play, the Strong Breed. The same way, Clark has picked from the Niger-Delta people to develop the happenings in his plays. Performance idioms of those traditions are languages imbued with folk philosophies and meanings special to them. These dramatists unlock these idioms from the original and pristine bases, and transpose, adapt or adopt them into drama.

In the same vein, the Nigerian film industry, Nollywood has been capturing these idioms on screen. The whole process becomes so easier in film than drama due to sophisticated and complex technology use in film production. From the continent, there have been films with traditional content, but the ratio is still trailing films from other genres. India and China can be said to have led the market in this respect. Films like *Saikati* (1993) by Ann Mungai about circumcision amongst the Maasai people of Kenya, *Battle of the Sacred Tree* (1994) by Kinyanjui have so much influence in film market in Kenya. In Nigeria, there have been films with traditional materials such as *Agony Prince*, *Throne of Glory*, *Akutu*, *Roots* etc.

In music and dance, there has been so much synthesis of traditional dance movements with contemporary movements. We could see the *Iwawa* dance and *Ikarma* dances mixed with other movements in contemporary dance shows. This can be one of the ways that the dance can be relevant in contemporary terms.

This approach is crucial to the survival of the traditional materials which ought to be applied to other arts like film and theatre that have benefitted from other traditions. This only becomes serious if the authority organizing Iyani keeps it going as an annual event as it used to be. This should be done as a matter of urgency because the festival is capable of appealing to people of other cultures.

### **Conclusion**

Iyani festival has a lot to be desired by contemporary audience if given attention by artists. The festival's activities are waning because it has not been given appreciable attention for a long time. However, contemporary artists of different places stand to benefit from the festival's materials if utilized. Museums, theatre and film can tap from this festival.

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