



Ekú Otung: Theatrical and Transcendental Celebration of Death among the Ejaghams of Calabar

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Abstract

Death, within many African societies, is the spring board towards life re-incarnation. It is not perceived as extinction but as a transition from one life to another; a mere change of abode. Among the Qua/Ejagham speaking people of Cross River State Nigeria, Death is celebrated and even more elaborate are the rites, rituals and celebrations especially when dignitaries and royalties are involved. Looking at the funeral rites of the kings of the Qua/Ejgham speaking people, this rite commonly known as the Eku Otung, this is the unveiling of the kings death which is usually done by the women who wear a costume of male black tail coat over a loin tied round their waist with a black hat; these women begin the farewell rites of the dead king dressed in this manner; they move round the vicinity of the kings abode while chanting a course to their final destination which is the town square hence the society is informed of the kings demise. As soon as these women start this ritual the native wooden gong known as the ihuk by the Qua/Ejagham people is used to announce the ritual procession, this paper highlights the theatrical elements present in this rituals, its transcendental perspectives of the funeral celebration, why these rite is esteemed among the people and its potency for the living, thereby, establishing its relevance in today's society.

Introduction

Pre-colonial societies in Africa were pregnant or loaded with enormous theatrical traditions which manifested in myths, legends and oral performances of the people. African societies can boast of myriads of beliefs and practices which are embodied in or have their roots in the religions and philosophies of the people. At birth, the African is not viewed as belonging only to the biological parents but to the community. As such, his welfare

becomes not only the interest of the parents and close relatives, but that of the community at large (Mbiti 110). In the African culture, birth is celebrated elaborately. In the process of growing up, puberty and adulthood are equally very significant stages in African existence. So death, especially of dignitaries warrants elaborate ceremonies. Even more elaborate are these ceremonies in the demise of a king. Mbiti asserts that the phenomenon called death concerns everybody, partly because sooner or later everyone will face it and perhaps because of the attendant loss and sorrow associated with it. Concluding, Mbiti (149) opines that it is no wonder that rituals connected with death are usually elaborate. Death is the springboard towards life re-incarnation. These rites of passage do not only raise the aesthetic out lay of the ceremonies, but are equally believed to enforce and ensure the “safe landing” of the king in the land beyond and the empowerment of the next king in the Ejagham tradition.

The Qua/Ejagham people of Nigeria reside in Cross River State. Cross River State is Southeast of Nigeria on the border with Cameroon. There are 18 local government areas in Cross River State. The Qua, one of the many Ejagham peoples, are found in four of these, namely, Akpabuyo, Bakassi, Odukpani and Calabar Municipality. The Quas are said to have migrated from the Cameroon region to their present place. According to Onor the Ejagham migration is divided into clusters and the first cluster are the “Qua who constitute the Ejagham in Calabar Municipality, Akpabuyo and Odukpani” (39). Edet Ekpo, also in tracing the migration history of the Ejagham people posits that with the growth along their migration route of settlement evolved...and with the growth in size of these settlements, important satellite or constituent villages sprung up around each of them... Each of the settlements acquires the Mgbe or (Egbo) and establishes the Mgbe shrine, then selects an Ntoe (A new king) from the founding father or out of royal line (Ekpo 35).

Among the Ejagham peoples, the Mgbe is the most important traditional institution. Before independence, Onor stresses that the *Mgbe* “operated as an effective organ in the executive arm of the political structure of pre-colonial Ejagham” (101). The Mgbe was and is still a leopard society predominantly male initiate. According to Talbot, the choice of a leopard as a symbol of this institution was informed by the fact that the images of a leopard easily arrest the imagination of the forest people as a representative of power, authority and dignity (Talbot 107). This Leopard society in the Ejagham culture, is segmented into two categories. The secular *Mgbe* and

the mystical *Mgbe*. On one hand, the secular *Mgbe* can also be termed the *Okum Mgbe*. Onor quoting Dewhurst;

the *Okum Mgbe* was a man clothed from head to feet in a well knitted garment stripped in alternate horizontal sections...he wore a straw coloured bracelet and ankles and enormous ruff, made apparently from leaves of young roofing palms. A yellow sash round the waist was tied at the back and to it was attached a bell (102)

On the other hand, the mystical *Mgbe* is the *mmoyo*. The *mmonyo* is perceived as staff of authority. It is also believed to be the royal spirit of the mystical *Mgbe*. The *mmonyo* is significantly used during the coronation of a new king and the transition of a dead king. So the functioning of these categories of *Mgbe* play a vital role in the government and in getting justice. When a new *Ntoe* is coroneted, the crowned king is believed to sit, dine and sleep with the *Mgbe*. In the same vein, when the *Ntoe* is on transition, he is not buried. According to the *Mgbe* tradition, the king is usually 'hidden' in his abode for 24 hours. *Ntufam Okoro Ntoe* confirming this in an interview, asserts that in the *Qua/Ejagham* tradition, "a king is not buried but hidden in the *Mgbe* tradition". But before this, the royal fraternity *Otto O'em* of the clan of the demised *Ntoe*, and *mgbe* title holders and initiates quickly assembles at midnight in the abode of the demise *Ntoe*. The reason for the assemblage is to disengage or dissociates the demised *Ntoe* from the *Mgbe* society. Once this is accomplished, the public is made to believe that the king has taken ill. By this notification, the town is expected to fall into a lull until the period the king is pronounced dead. This period which may be between three (3) to twelve (12) months, gives time for the planning of the *Ntoe's* official funeral. When arrangements for the obsequies are concluded, from one week to one month is ear-marked for the activities associated with the obsequies.

Ekú Otung Among the Qua of Calabar

Ekú Otung among the *Qua* people of Calabar is the same with other *Ejagham* tribes in *Akamkpa*, *Ikóm*, *Etung* Local Government Areas (LGA) or any other location. For the commencement of the *Ekú Otung* proper, on a designated day, usually Friday, the members of the *Otto O'em*, *mgbe* title holders,

prominent members of royal families of other Qua clans will assemble at the deceased Ntoe's palace from 9.00 p.m. Also, princes, princesses and royal mourners will also be present. Their duty is to part-take in the salvaging the ailing king as the custom demands. Among these royal mourners will be traditional diviners and healers. Their primary duty it is to heal the king. This ceremony called *mbian egogam* – healing, is performed in pantomime. The episode is enacted between midnight and 5.00a.m.

The diviners and traditional healers take turns. Their simple task is to save the king. They carry out this ritualistic assignment in the king's chamber, unaided and out of view of the people. In the unfolding drama, one healer having spent between thirty minutes to one hour comes out of the king's chamber, shaking his head. The anxious crowd will understand that this non-verbal communication implies that his effort is naught. This process is repeated by the next diviner until the last of the diviners whose concoction is considered to be the most potent takes his turn. On his return from the king's chamber, he confronts anxious faces and informs them that he needs to get an important missing items for his concoction. The diviner will be permitted by the Collage of Atoe who are always present, to fetch the needed items. An hour or so after his departure, the first daughter of the demised Ntoe, or the *Ntoe Ninkae* - Queen Mother of the clan (in cases where the deceased Ntoe did not have a daughter) or any of the most senior princesses, is nominated to bring situation report on the condition of the Ntoe.

Returning from the king's chamber, the princess' facial expression spells misfortune. Maintaining that expression, she confers briefly with the other princesses in whispers before proceeding to the Atoe present to do same. Her movements, mime, grimaces and facial expressions intimate the anxious audience that all efforts to save the king, her father, had failed. The princess, permitted by the Atoe, will then wail - "*Nse oma akpo-e, nse oma akpo-e*"-meaning my father is dead. This cry is put into an ensuing chant which other princesses will echo. All the princesses will rise from their mat sitting positions on the floor and carry on the dirge, while changing their clothing. The women, while chanting, step into their *Ekú Otung* costume of male black tail coats over loins tied to their waist from the left hand side. They wear a black top hat to complement. In their right hands, the princesses will carry staff, and they will go bare feet. They rise from the palace, move round the vicinity while charting a course to their final destination. Their final destination is the mgbé shrine, situated in the town square. This whole

episode is so convincing that a first time visitor to this event would readily believe the pantomimic dramatization to be as real as presented.

At the beginning of the procession by the princesses in the palace, the native wooden talking gong, the *lhuk*, at the town's square, sounds almost immediately. The *lhuk*, usually placed on the roof of the mgbe shrine, informs the public of the Ntoe's demise. The procession of the princesses, their chants and the sounding of the *lhuk* normally take place in the early hours of the morning from 5.00 a. m.



Plate 1: The “*lhuk*” being used to announce the demise of the Ntoe at dawn

The Ntoe's first daughter leads the procession and calls the chant. She dresses differently from the black tail coat mourners. She is expected to look as haggard as possible. On her neck is a dangling young rooster and tender palm frond. Her chant is accompanied by the sound of a wooden rattle that she holds in her right hand. In their reply to the chant, the other princesses recall the contributions of the past Atoe to the growth of the town. This act seems to be an age long tradition. Farris Thompson quotes in reference to this act opines that “An elderly woman with a rooster held aloft stands before the leopard-society house and calls the names of great ancestors, one by one” (244). On passing by a former Ntoe's residences, the princesses raise their staff in obeisance while recalling what that particular Ntoe had contributed to the town and mankind. At about 6.00 a. m. when the women arrive at the town square, it is perceived that their noises, chants and hullabaloo that will follow this procession, do make the mystical mgbe, and the soul of the deceased king, disappear. From here, the men take over. The men put mgbe injunction, banning any form of noise in the town. This is so

that the mystical *mgbe* in the nearby bushes will not be frightened farther into the forest.



Plate 2: The first daughter of the late Ntoe of Nkonib Qua clan with other Princesses paying obeisance to a former Ntoe.

The following Friday, at nightfall from 10.00 p. m., in the ceremony that will ensue, high ranking *mgbe* members from other Qua clans, arrive to search for the disappeared mystical *Mgbe* at the *Egbe Mboko* of the clan. *Egbe Mboko* is the designated forest area the mystical *Mgbe* is believed to have been detected. Once in the forest from that time, the screening of *Mgbe* initiates, who had come from far and wide, is carried out rhetorically. This is done with *nsibidi* by the *mgbe* chief priest on those present, amid chants, singing and drumming. The measure is to detect infiltrators into the arena. The search for the mystical *Mgbe* properly commences immediately after this. The search continues till dawn when the mystical *Mgbe* will be captured and caged in a miniature cage called *Dibo*. This *dibo*, which is built during the search, is used to confine the mystical *Mgbe*. The cage which may measure about two feet in height, four feet in length and two and a half feet in width is usually draped with palm fronds in the pre-colonial and colonial era. These days, the *Ukara*; a special wax material with *Nsibidi* inscriptions, is used in combination with the palm fronds. To the cage, a red plume measuring one foot is pinned to the fore. The cage is also tied with a heavy chain. The chain is meant for pulling the captured mystical *Mgbe* back to the *mgbe* shrine in the town's square. On tops of the cage is placed a leopard skin to symbolize the presence of the mystical leopard. However, the *dibo* remains in the *egbe*

mboko till about 4.00 p.m. when the captured mystical *Mgbe* is dragged out in a procession to its shrine in the town square.



Plate 3: “Dibo”- the cage for the mystical *Mgbe* with the chain for pulling it..

Prior to the procession to the square, the inhabitants of the town awake to meet *Okina*, the traditional clown (who also doubles as the mystical *mgbe* reconnoiter). The anxiously excited town’s people form the audience for the performance. and other kinds of *Mgbe*, swing into action. *Okina* is the foremost of them all. The *okina* who is supposedly an intending Asian *Mgbe* member, goes bare body with the *Nsibidi* drawn on his body. He wears a loin tied in the *mgbe* fashion and a hat. This jester hangs a raffia bag that dangles down left shoulder, holds a deer horn on his left hand and a stick in the other. He goes round the main streets of the town, walking in a way that evokes laughter. All is done in an attempt to have an escape goat. In his rounds, any member of the public who laughs at *Okina*’s monologue or actions is a victim and is compelled to drop money into the horn by way of fine. To the inhabitants of the community, non-initiates of the *mgbe* society and the now expectant audience, the appearance of *Okina* signals the coming of great events. Before noon, after making his rounds and surveying the environment, *Okina* retreats to the *egbe mboko* where he came from, taking the information of “All Clear” back with him. His retreat makes way for another genre of *mgbe*, *Mboroko*.



Plate 4: Okina on his way home putting the audience at the background

Another genre of mgbe, *Mboroko*, from the same location, also appears to inform the waiting public of the day's activities. He is also a man of Asian mgbe grade. A white piece of cloth is tied to his head in a manner that the excess drops to the waist line of the masquerader. Accompanied by a single drummer, the Mboroko's costume is an *Akasi*, a circular ring-like structure made of cane that is suspended from his waist. On this object is covered Ukara cloth. Mboroko hangs an animal skin bag on one side and a mirror on the other. On the mirror is also drawn the nsibidi symbols. He carries on his right hand, a leopard's right humerus, elongated by an additional stick to form a staff. The staff is painted white and decorated with red piece of cloth. Mboroko, like the Okina, moves round the town with a message. In his monologue, the Mboroko enjoins the public to be of good behaviour as the symbol of authority, the mystical mgbe has been found. Ekpo et. al. indicate that the Mboroko goes beyond this to invite all and sundry to feast thereafter (110). During the obsequies of Ntoe Ekong Basse of Akim Qua clan on January 16 – 21, 2006 the Mboroko was quoted as chanting "*Nkae aka kponggha ya nnim*"; wife should not quarrel with her husband. "*Nnim aka kponggha ya nkae*"; husband should not quarrel with his wife also. These lines are rendered intermittently after three alternating beats from his drummer and the chorus, "Mboroko" is given by the drummer. Mboroko later makes way for Murua.

Murua, is also the mgbe surveillance group moves from the *Egbe Mboko*. The duty of Murua, which has a small group of about three to five persons, is to make sure that the reports of the Mboroko are correct. The costume and props of the leader, (who is a bare bodied middle aged man of an intending Asian Mgbe grade) include a calabash head made of beautiful impressive coloured plumes with some feathers dangling over and standing on a base called *Esi-Okpere*. The esi-okpere is supported by satin sashes, folded into frills in front while they fall to the waist of the carrier from behind. Between his lips is a red feather from an African grey parrot's tail. The feather is to prevent him from talking to members of the public. On his arms are four beautifully coloured traditional bracelets, indigenously called *ataba nkom*. One set is tied to his wrists and the other to his arms. In the murua, the ekasi is also used on the waist. This time, instead of the ukara material, the ekasi is sometimes decorated with coloured cloths. Colours of blue, yellow and red satin materials are used not only as decoration but for significant values. The monotony of the man's bear body is broken with a black shoulder cape adorned with bright coloured beads dangling from his neck. Under the left shoulder, the murua carries a mirror of about one (1) foot in length which reflects sunlight as he moves. It is believed that this mirror in the sun wards off any intending evil spirit. Murua's outing lasts the whole afternoon till when the main ceremony begins. By the time invited guests take their seats for the ceremony, the murua exits.

Back in the *Egbe Mboko*, the different types of mgbe start a procession to the town square with the captured mgbe in the cage. The cage is surrounded by Atoe of various clans and other high ranking mgbe initiates who may have come from far and near. The *Akem-ake*; short tailed masquerades are at the forefront, closely followed by the *Adodo-ike*; long tailed masquerades. Then follows a set of *Ebongo*; a gentle version of mgbe masquerade. This is in a bid to form a barricade to mask the confined mystical mgbe in the cage from the audience.

The Okum Ogbe is the last on the row before the *Mmonyoy*. Like the Maze in the states' and federal legislative houses, the mmonyoy is a staff of authority of the newly selected Ntoe. It is also the royal spirit of the mystical mgbe which must be present in the procession. Ekpo et. al. confirm this by stating that "... in the procession must be the Mmonyoy bearer, a royal emblem which signifies that the royal spirit or mystical mgbe is taken along that procession" (109).

In the procession, Ogbe initiates of different categories, types and grades sing, dance and jubilate amidst the roaring sound of the captured mystical mgbe. The Mmony bearer who is positioned in front of the cage, dances and lifts up the Mmony and brings it down intermittently while plotting the bearing for the confined mystical mgbe. Other genres of Ogbe; the short tailed, the long tailed, Ebongo, Okum Ogbe earlier mentioned, occasionally ensure that the Mmony is safe. New mgbe initiates, usually young boys who lead the procession simulate the pulling of the mystical mgbe in a dance while holding young palm fronds tied together to form a fence.



Plate 5: A cross section of a typical Eku Otung procession showing various genres of *Ogbe*

As the procession gradually approaches the host community's Mgbe shrine or lodge, the climax is in sight. Few metres to the hall, the selected Ntoe steps out, collects the Mmony from the bearer and enters the Mgbe hall. Almost immediately, the various Okum Ogbe in the procession stampede the on-lookers, destabilizing them from their viewing positions. In the course of this, the cage concealing the mystical mgbe spins round, collapses and flattens. The new Ntoe has received the staff of office and is now imbued with the royal spirit of the mystical mgbe. He is prepared for the ascension to the throne. This marks the end of the obsequies for the late Ntoe. The spiritual crowning has been consummated, is the next step is the formal and physical crowning and presentation of the new Ntoe.

The Theatrical and Transcendental in Eku Otung

Theatre is make-belief. Conventional theatre presents actors and actresses who have consciously suspended their character traits and imbibed those of other personalities involved in the play being enacted on stage before an audience that has equally agreed to willingly suspended its disbelief. Traditional African theatre does not follow strictly these confines. The gathering of traditional diviners and healers in Eku Otung with the intent of curing the ailing Ntoe expresses one of such variances. Even though all gathered are aware that the king has passed on, this episode of make-belief still ensues with the different characters playing themselves. This may have prompted Agu to opine that no one will deny that traditional African theatre is unique in its own right. He goes further to state that it is a theatre of medium and manner rather than substance (1). Brockett and Ball affirm this when they assert after enumerating theatre's ambiances:

These examples by no means exhaust the possibilities, because theatrical experience has been as varied as the cultures in which it has appeared. The practices we are familiar with today encompass only a limited range of the theatre's possibilities (1).

Okina the jester or traditional clown distorts his face and walks in a particular way intended to evoke laughter, while carrying out the assignment of surveillance. This episode, beyond providing relief from the pressures of life and the loss of the king by injecting laughter, tries to instill in the audience and community the virtue of self-control. Okina's ordeal expresses the fact that things may not be the way they appear. On the flip side of the laughable, is the "pitiful" and vice versa. These two attributes; relief through laughter and self-control, are well beaten paths by theatre. Brockett and Ball again inform that art including theatre is valuable for its capacity to improve the quality of life by bringing us pleasure, sharpening our perceptions, by increasing our sensitivity to others and our surroundings, equally suggesting that moral and societal concerns should take precedence over materialistic goals (16). Okina's performance is a subtle way of enriching the human capital.

Theatre entertains, informs and educates as well as edify. During Eku Otung, a rare opportunity is provided for the community's inhabitants and youths to learn more about the way of life of the people. It is an occasion for the

display of rare masquerades whose outlay and display are pleasant. Ayakoroma quoting Clark indicates that traditional dramas and presentations, especially those based on myths serve to record the origins of the institutions and peoples who own them. They also serve a civic and social purpose by educating and initiating the young in the ways and duties of the community and provide avenues for robust entertainment (19). Exploring Trevor Rhone's *Old Story Time* as an aspect of Jamaican theatre, Eshiet equally shows the potency of theatre as an avenue for information, education and fostering communal living:

.... Adroitly blending oral, aural and visual media he communicates with cultural means recurrent in and signally meaningful to his histo-linguistic background. The sequence of effects he stirs resounds with a storytelling aesthetic, which goes beyond entertainment to familiarize generations of its audience with nuts and bolts of day-to-day living. Delving deep into the memory of the race, Rhone uses his theatre as a dependable way of making the sparks of cohesion fly in a culture gelded by negations (41-42).

Eku Otung's kernel is transition done with splinters and sparks of information, education and edification wrapped and encapsulated in the gel of entertainment.

The *mmony* transcends a mere staff. It is a symbol of authority and power. Beyond this, it is believed to harbour the spirits of the mystical mgbe and other Atoe who at one time or the other had had the opportunity of being infested with the powers of the *mmony*. As such, the presence of the *mmony* shows the presence of past leaders who are at hand to lead and guide the present Ntoe in the affairs of the community. It is akin to a meeting of the incumbent governor with ex-governors. Their wealth of experience is at the disposal of the present Ntoe. Without the *mmony*, the Ntoe loses the pedestal which sets him apart from others within the community. This transcendental characteristic is equally witnessed in the flattening of the cage containing the mystical mgbe. It goes beyond mere deflation of a contraption. It is a transposition of power and authority with

attendant blessings, promise and hope for the continued existence of the community. These are very significant and efficacious bits in Eku Otung. The exercise called Eku Otung might appear a wasteful venture but its efficacy can be tested when impostors attempt to usurp power. The mysterious and calamitous events that often follow lay credence to the fact that indulging in the right path, sets the community right in the eyes of the ancestors. Equally, the fact that this celebration has tarried till date underscores its relevance and belief of the communities in its efficacy. Thus the celebration carries along with it transcendental and spiritual imports.

Without indulging in the serials involved in Eku Otung, the new Ntoe cannot be crowned and does not have the blessings of the ancestors. The procession through the town especially passing through past Atoe's houses, is to inform them that the late Ntoe is coming to join them and to solicit their support, protection and guidance for the new one. This goes to affirm the African belief in the continuous relationship between the dead, the living and the unborn and the significant role the dead plays in activities of the living.

It has been asserted that any story about the arts is invariably about us; that is, our perceptions of the world as we have come to see and respond to it and the various ways we tend to communicate our understanding to each other (Sporre 12). If the above statement is true, then one can safely say that Eku Otung as an artistic display which embodies songs, dances, pantomime, mime, chants etcetera is not art for art's sake rather a part of the Qua/Ejagham world view and the expression of same. Theatre, symbolism and philosophy are ardent components of world view.

Conclusion

Death is not perceived as extinction but a transition from one life to another, a mere change of abode. This perception of after-life has its roots in the belief that man is both a material being and a spiritual being (Uduigwomen 16). It explains in part why Eku Otung is esteemed among the Qua/Ejagham people. Everyone has a share in death and the king being a physical and spiritual symbol of the community, must be properly sent forth. Even though we dwell in the age of technology, the mystery called death still persists. The advent of computer has not adequately de-mystified or eradicated death. Therefore, the beliefs attached to it, equally persist. Although there is no direct reference to a supreme deity, the religious significance of Eku Otung lies within the enormous role played by mgbe in the entire ceremony. The mgbe shrine and totems depending on Qua clan, is akin to a place of worship.

Authority and directives often emanate from it. Above all, mgbe acknowledges and pays obeisance to the Supreme Being. As Akinfenwa indicates, this form of worship is a significant portion of Yoruba and by extension African religion. It goes with beneficial portends (97).

In these days of technology, the rich tradition of religious theatre of Eku Otung of the Quas, if properly documented in all forms including drama, can gradually be adapted to suit the requirements or the average tourist. For tourism, the re-enacting of the transcendental and other elements can serve not only to heighten the aesthetic outlay of the ceremony but also chart a "gradual change or transformation from what exists as ritual and religious function into becoming entertaining curiosities"(Mason,16). The Qua/Ejagham as practitioners of Eku Otung can take the challenge of transformation now or remain a 'closed' product consumed only by the locals instead of becoming a product for mass culture.

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