



The Dramatic and Poetic Contents of the *Idju* Festival of the Agbarha- Ame People of Warri

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Entertainment through various acts of performance is a central part of everyday life in Africa. At the village squares, under the moonlight nights, around the fire place, during intercommunity wrestling contests, at annual festivals and different religious observances, various cultural pieces such as dance, songs, tales, and ritual performances are re-enacted to initiate efforts at relating to their ancestors and events of time past. Festival is one sure means through which the people relate to their past and interact with the present as well as the future. During festivals, various dramatic and artistic feats are re-enacted to satisfy the aesthetic yearnings of spectators/audiences. The *Idju* festival of the Agbarha-Ame people of Warri in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria is one of such festivals that is celebrated with artistic grandeur and all the vestiges of real theatre. This paper examines the dramatic and poetic contents of the festival and contends that, like other festivals in Africa, the *Idju* festival possesses credible elements of drama and poetry such as dance, impersonation, procession, ritual, spectacles, costumes, spectators, dialogue, songs, mime, gesture, incantation, tempo and other paralinguistic techniques, all aimed

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at uplifting the excitement of the audience. The paper thus concludes that the Agbarha-Ame dramaturgy is made up of groups of traditional and performing arts in a cultural milieu that contains mimetic impersonation either of human actions or of spiritual essence.

Festivals have continuously played an important part in the life of Africans. Through the various rites, rituals and other dramatic and poetic performances, the people are able to connect with their history as well as engage in different forms of cultural artistry with which they distinguish themselves as a people. During festivals, various dramatic pieces are enacted as songs, mime, dance, impersonation occupy significant aspects of the festival.

The origin of drama is often traced to ancient rites and festivals. Arthur Koestler (quoted in Echeruo, 2014: 170-171) adumbrates this point when he notes that the "dramatic art has its origins in ceremonial rites – dances, songs and mime – which enacts important past or derived future events: rain, a successful hunt, an abundant harvest. The gods, demons, ancestors and animals participating in the events were impersonated with the aid of masks, costumes, tattooing and makeup." J.P. Clark (2014:71) traces the origin of European drama to the Egyptian Osiris and the Greek Dionysius. He contends that Nigerian drama is likely to be found in the "religious and magical ceremonies and festivals of the Yoruba, the *egwugwu* and *mimo* masquerades of the Ibo, and the *owu* and *oru* water masquerades of the Ijaw." He states that,

if drama means the "elegant imitation" of some actions significant to a people, if this means the physical representation or the evocation of one poetic image or a complex of such images, if the vital elements to such representation or evocation are speech, music, ritual, song as well as dance and mime, and if as the Japanese say of their Noh theatre, the aim is to "open the ear" of the mind of a spectator in a corporate audience and "open his eyes" to the beauty of form, then there is drama in plenty in Nigeria, much of this as distinctive as any in China, Japan and Europe (2014:69).

Clark goes ahead to describe Nigerian drama as falling into two broad groups: "traditional drama" and "modern drama". He further

sub-divides the traditional drama into two main groups. According to him, one of the sub-groups is "sacred because its subjects and aims are religious, while the other is secular drama, shading from the magical, through a number of sub-kinds to the straight play and entertainment piece". He notes that within the sacred species, there are again two types: "one grouping together what have been variously termed ancestral myth plays, and the other which are masquerades or plays by age groups and cults". Clark concludes that the "dramas of *Obatala* and *Oshagiyán* performed annually at Oshogbo and Ejigbo provides indisputable examples of the first sacred kind" (2014:71). As shall be seen later, the *Idju* festival of the Agbarhame people of Warri, Delta State, falls into this category.

In his study of Nigerian theatre and drama, Yemi Ogunbiyi (2014:2) supports Clark's view that the "primitive root" of traditional theatre and drama in Nigeria and indeed Africa must be sought in the numerous religious rituals and festivals that exist in many Nigerian communities and elsewhere. According to him, drama in traditional Africa societies "arose out of fundamental human needs in the dawn of human civilization and has continued to express those needs ever since". The point being made here is that, humans in their earliest period have tried to re-enact events and situations which have shaped their struggles and successes overtime. Ogunbiyi traces this origin from human's quest to understudy nature as an adventure; in the area of food gathering to their battles over anticipated adversaries. In his view, the time humans acquired knowledge from their environment shaped their awareness about nature, their means remained limited to what was an implacably hostile environment. He however believes that human's desire to ensure the steady flow of food as a permanent victory over their numerous adversaries prompted them to understand that they could achieve their desires by dancing and acting them out in the form of rites. Ogunbiyi therefore quotes George Thompson who succinctly captures this idea thus:

By a supreme effort of will, they endeavour to impose illusion on reality. In this they fail, but the effort is not wasted. Thereby the physical conflict between them and their environment is resolved. Equilibrium is restored and so, when they return to reality, they are actually fit to grapple with it than they were before. (2014:3)

Certainly, this is the origin of African drama. For as Ogunbiyi puts it, "...with greater awareness these rites (now rituals), were modified and altered, such that it became possible with time to isolate the myths which have developed around the rituals and to act them out as traditional drama of some sort". (2014:4). In other words, there is symmetry between African traditional drama, its environment and its agrarian culture. This is why Ruth Finnegan (2012:486) believes that African drama should not be measured with the features or traditions of European drama. This is because enactment which is one of the most important aspects of drama is well verbalized in traditional African drama. Furthermore, she argues that while actors who imitate persons and events are well established in traditional African dramatic forms, "other elements, appearing to a greater or lesser degree at different times or places: linguistic content; plot; the represented interaction of several characters; specialized scenery, etc.; often music; and – of particular importance in most African performances – dance". The insights in Finnegan's work are useful in our study of the dramatic content of the *Idju* festival of the Agbarha-Ame people of Warri.

One important question that is worth asking, however, is what constitutes drama in a cultural setting and drama itself. Does every rite or festival have dramatic elements or contents? What are the constituents of drama in the cultural setting? Ola Rotimi (2014) in his article, "The Drama in Africa Ritual Display", describes the elements that constitute drama in the cultural setting, and what does not. He believes that the standard acceptance of the term "drama" within a cultural setting, implies "an imitation of an action... of a person or persons in action", the ultimate object of which is to edify or to entertain. In other words, he sees imitation, suspense and con-

flict as the cornerstone of dramatic enactment. According to him, "what could be, and has frequently been mistaken for drama in most African traditional displays, appears when this latter type of non-imitative ceremonial effervesces with movement, rhythm, and spectacle, beyond the ordinary" (93) are not considered. Rotimi sees festivals such as the *Gelede* masquerade display and the *Eyo* festival of Lagos as not possessing the features of drama while those like the "*ala suwo*" initiation rite by the Nembe and "*Irie*" by the Okrika people of Nigeria as containing robust dramatic contents. In other words, imitation and role play are the measure ingredients of drama in a cultural setting. As would be shown in this essay, the content of the *Idju* festival is suffused with concrete elements of drama such as imitation, procession, dialogue, dance display, mime, music, songs, prop and costume, to mention a few.

It is important to note at this point that the materials for this essay are based on fieldwork carried out at separate times and over many years of interaction with participants in my capacity as one who is born and bred in Igbudu, one of the seven villages that made up the Agbarha-Ame kingdom of Warri. Additional information is sourced from personal interviews with role-players, community elders as well as those who are knowledgeable in the history and traditions of the people. However, I do not claim to be an authority in the custom and traditions of the people. Secondly, I shall in this essay engage with the mimetic aspects of the festival – the cutlass clashes, singing and dancing. This is my modest contribution to the rich cultural and artistic heritage as contained in the *Idju* festival of the Agbarha-Ame people of Warri.

The *Idju* festival songs are indigenous oral poetic pieces with signifiers of conflict composed specifically for the festival ceremonies and performed to celebrate the heroic exploits and qualities of individuals and groups who have made their mark to uplift the stature of the community. They are also performed to arouse the spirit of the dancers/celebrants who dance to the songs and to the lyrical

drumming of the professional drummers. The dancers rely on the tempo of the drums and each drumbeat is punctuated by the exchanges between the lead singer and the group – all accentuated in dramatic fashion. This is what Romanus Egudu means when he avers that in African society, song is always “generally a purposeful affair, in the sense that it is not meant merely to satisfy some aesthetic cravings or to engender intellectual appeal”; instead, the purpose “ranges from ritual, through demonstration of accepted values, to simple moral or ethical education”.(1978:36). It is in this regard that Finnegan (2012:486) notes that: “Rather than produce a verbal definition, it seems better to point to the various elements which tend to come together in what, in the wide sense we normally regard as drama. Most important is the idea of enactment, of representation through actors who imitate person and events.”

One of the literary devices employed by the *Idju* dancers is mime in the dramatization of different roles during performances. They also utilize the resources of mock duel to the effect of what Finnegan calls “variation and exaggeration of speed” (384). Finnegan also draws attention to the role of the song in “marking the structure of the story in a clear and attractive way” and how it helps to add beauty of skillful accompaniment as well as provide audience involvement and participation. Efforts shall be made in this essay to interrogate these artistic indices. But for now I would provide a short background of the Agbarha-Ame people of Nigeria and the *Idju* festival.

A Brief History of the Agbarha-Ame People

It is true that festivals and ceremonies anywhere in the world represent the experiences of a people. To fully understand the dramatic and poetic contents as well as the functions of the *Idju* festival of the Agbarha-Ame people therefore, it is necessary to have an overview of the people’s history and culture from which some of the dramatic

and poetic resources of the festival are derived. This is significant because the aesthetic pleasure that one may enjoy from the dramatic spectacles and the poetic satisfaction of the festival are informed by one's knowledge of the people and their folklore. As Tanure Ojaide (2009) puts it, "one should not use the aesthetic criteria of one culture to judge the works of other cultures" (5).

The Agbarha-Ame people are believed to be originally from Edo territory and stopped in Agbarha-Otor, from where they founded the present Agbarha described as Agbarha-Ame (Onigu Otite, 2011:309). The Agbarha-Ame kingdom is located in Warri Township in present day Warri South Local Government Council of Delta State, Nigeria and consists of seven settlements namely: Otovwodo-Agbarha, Igbudu, Edjeba, Ogunu, Oteghele, Ukpokiti, and Okurode-Urhobo. Their neighbours are Uvwie, Udu, Ogbe-Ijo, Okere-Urhobo and the Itsekiri. The name, Agbarha, Otite notes, is used both to cover all the seven towns as one unit and to refer to one of the towns i.e. Otovwodo-Agbarha (Otite, 2011, 309).

The Agbarha-Ame people founded and occupied the land they live in as "a virgin area in about the 13th century or earlier according to calculations and traditions which agree generally with those settlement time scales of Oghara consolidated polity prior to the passage of Iginua's party to Ode-Itsekiri in the 15th century" (Otite, 2011:311). Otite explains further that "Agbarha-Ame were the original inhabitants of the township of what is now Warri. The township of Warri used to be farmlands belonging to Agbarha-Ame people" (2011:311).

Socially, religion is an important element in the life of the people. It is evident in their songs and other practices which express the abundance of God's mercies in, sorrows, joys, and aspirations. The highest religious head among the people is the *Qsedjo/Olowu-Edje*. He is the chief priest of the Agbarha-Ame deity known as *Owhurie* on which the festival's activities revolve. This is why the festival which is a celebration of goodness of the *Owhurie* deity is popularly

known as “Agbassa Juju”. The word “Agbassa” is a corruption of the kingdom’s name Agbarha while juju is used to represent the deity. In other words, “Agbassa Juju” simply means “Agbarha Deity”. It is not anybody that can become an Olowu-Edje as the position is strictly dictated by the Owhurie deity itself. This is why Otite explains that the “position is feared and uncontested not only because one has to be ‘called’ to serve by the deity, but also because of the taboo restrictions” (2011: 312). The main function of the Olowu-Edje, according to Otite, is to “offer sacrifice to propitiate on behalf of individuals or groups requiring such services, and also to function prominently during the bi-annual festival associated with the deity” (Otite, 2011: 312). However, in the course of the establishment of the various communities that made up the Agbarha-Ame kingdom, the people have had cause to engage hostile neighbours around them. Oral history is replete with stories of battles and how various warlords (*Igbus*, singular-*Ogbu*) and field marshals (*Ilotu*, singular-*Olotu*) have engaged hostile enemies, spirits of the wild and animals that threatened the peaceful existence of the people. Names of *Ilotu* such as Ememu, Avwunudu, Ogunu and Essi of Igbudu resonate in the minds of the people and they feature prominently in their folklore. It is these acts of valour displayed by their ancestors with the assistance of the Owhurie deity that is bi-annually re-enacted at the *Idju* festival.

Origin of the *Idju* Festival of the Agbarha-Ame People of Warri

The *Idju* festival is a bi-annual festival celebrated by the Agbarha-Ame people of Warri in worship of the Owhurie deity (the god of war). The festival is characterised by ancestral veneration (Esemọ and Iniemọ ‘male and female’ ancestors). The festival, also known as “Agbassa Juju,” features ritual activities, symbolic war duel occasioned by war dance as well as intense festivity. It is one of the unify-

ing forces that bind the seven communities that make up the Agbarha-Ame kingdom.

The origin of the festival from oral accounts may be traced back to the early 15th century. Oral accounts show that the ancestors who founded the kingdom first settled at Ukpokiti and then Oteghele. They however left Oteghele to settle on the southern part of the Omia River. During their stay there, there were frequent deaths of the elders. The people saw the frequent deaths of their elders as the handiwork of an evil force or a curse by a deviant spirit who was out to wreak havoc on the town in order to reduce her population. Otite explains that the people therefore sought the assistance of a diviner who directed them to retrieve their shrine/deity left behind at Oteghele to their present settlement. The people swiftly went and retrieved and installed the god and called it the Owhurie deity (Otite, 2011: 311). The people therefore instituted the bi-annual *Idju* festival in worship of the Owhurie deity for ensuring the people's safety from frequent deaths and for protecting them against external forces. Hence, during the celebration, the people wear gallant and warlike costumes, with the men wielding cutlasses in a procession that is characterised by mock dance duels of clanking cutlasses and other battle instruments.



Participants in enthusiastic mood at the *Idju* festival (Photo by De Lords Studios, Warri)

The aim is to re-enact the heroic warfare encountered by their ancestors and the victories they achieved. According to Otite, this “societal identity and the demonstration of the military ability to hold and defend its own place, land, waters, e.t.c., are re-enacted periodically ...in military festivals centred on the Owhurie war god” (2011: 313).

The festival which is celebrated on a day fixed by the Chief Priest with pomp and pageantry is preceded by six days of intense preparations. During this period, the preparations usually take place at night. The warriors from each of the settlements visit one another in groups and are escorted back by the host community. This is done to cement the cordial relationship that existed between them. Very early on the sixth day, warriors from the seven settlements would converge at Sedco, one of the hunting sites of the kingdom to carry some sacred ritual materials, which are wrapped in a mat, to Otovwodo in preparation for the final day of the festival.

As a war festival which marks the return of the war deity (Owhurie) from battle, the people on the day of the festival are dressed in martial costumes – red and white clothes sewn to represent costumes of their ancient warriors. Some of the male role players put on red or white skirt (*buluku*) and a sleeveless shirt while others leave the upper part of their body naked with their faces painted variously with kaolin and charcoal. Skulls of monkeys, birds, and feathers of wild birds, bells (both small and big), as well as different amulets are tied to various of their body and clothes. Red/white caps with feathers of birds pieced on them are also worn by participants, giving them an air of ancient traditional warriors – each bearing a cutlass or an axe, brooms or staff with scabbard worn around their shoulders. At intervals, one group would clank their cutlasses against those of others in a mock duel. The women dress in comical costumes, carrying brooms, palm fronds and sticks.



Participants in warring costumes at the *Idju* festival (Photo by De Lords Studios, Warri)

The activities of the final day start between 7am and 10am in the morning at each of the seven communities that made up the Agbarha-Ame kingdom. Each of the seven settlements, with the chief priests (*Esedjọ*) and Warriors, would process to Otovwodo (the traditional headquarters of the kingdom) to give account of their stewardship to the god of war (the Owhurie deity). Each troupe arrives with an *Osa* (a palm fronds decorated burning basket with a boy of about four years old) guarded by heavily armed warriors.



Youths display the *Osa* from each Agbarha-Ame settlements. (Photo by De Lords Studios, Warri)

The procession from each community arrives one after the other and halts at the feet of the Owhurie shrine at Otovwodo. They and their entourage dance to the admiration of the spectators before entering the temple.

This is quickly followed by the arrival of the Igbus (warlords) led by the Aridjo who is the traditional medicine man whose duty is to see to the safety of the warriors at war times. The Aridjo is vested with the traditional authority to “survey the conditions of safety in the town three times before the Olotu (field marshal) may venture out during the festival” (Otite, 2011: 313). During this period, the traditional sacred drum is being prepared by the chief drummer who pours libation and utters some chants to fortify the drums. His ritual fortification of the drums, which are painted in red and white, is climaxed by another round of libation with a special palm wine brought from the Owhurie shrine. The chief drummer has an assistant who beats some smaller sets of drums. When satisfied with the fortification of the drum, the chief drummer beats it to spur the warriors who are already at the arena. The warriors dance from one end of the arena to another and then to the deity’s altar directly facing the Owhuire temple, say some chants and then processed into the shrine, thus paving way for the arrival of the Olotu. The Olotu arrives the mini-theatre stage already prepared, accompanied by warriors who cover him with trees and palm fronds as the tempo of the sacred drum is increased. The scenario is such that the trees are seen to be moving as a forest that is being transferred. The Olotu’s emergence heralds a mock heroic dance of clanking of cutlasses and gallantry to the admiration of the spectators. He is led directly to the Owhurie temple for further fortifications. The Olotu, according to Otite, was a “war leader in pre-colonial times and although his position may now be regarded as ceremonial by appearing during the bi-annual festival, this appearance is mandatory”. He notes further that

“if the Olotu does not perform certain critical rituals, things might not go well with the people” (2011: 312). Hence the Owthurie festival is climaxed with the formal appearance of the Olotu.

At this stage, the arena is covered with enthusiastic participants who dance in a mock heroic duel of cutlass clanking. The tempo of the drum is heightened amidst clinking cutlasses. The *Igbus* (warlords) re-enter the arena, dance in a calculated steps in synchrony with the drumbeats and then move to the altar stage, a raised sacrificial platform in front of the temple, utter some chants and return to the inner chambers of the Owthurie temple. At this point, the arena is cleared to usher in the Olotu who emerges without the sacred head-gear. He is dressed in white *buluku* (skirt) with the upper part of his body, smeared with charcoal, naked. He holds two brooms in his hands and dances to salute the drummers to the admiration of the spectators. He moves from there to the sacrificial platform directly in front of the Owthurie shrine, utters appropriate chants and returns to face the spectators on the upper stage of the arena, dancing ostentatiously to the rhythm of the drum. He does this three times and then returns to the inner chambers of the Owthurie shrine. At this stage, elders and chiefs of the kingdom in jubilant mood dance around the open section of the arena to greet the spectators, creating a space for a free-for-all dance. This goes on for about thirty-five minutes and then the arena stage is called to order the second time to receive the Olotu, this time in full military regalia. He dons the Olotu head gear (a warrior cap decorated with feathers of sacred birds, each representing the numbers of enemies killed in battle), with the upper part of his body smeared with charcoal. He holds a cutlass on his right hand and the head of a goat on the left – drinking the fresh blood from the severed head of the goat at intervals, re-enacting an ancient battle scene where the blood from the severed head of an enemy warrior is drunk by the Olotu. The Olotu looks fierce in his charcoal-smeared body, marching menacingly in calculated steps, following the rhythmic beats of the drums. He dances for

about 25 minutes and he is escorted back to the inner chambers of the shrine. At this point, the oldest man of the kingdom is escorted to the arena by elders and chiefs, all dancing to the rhythm of the drumbeats. This signaling the end of the sacred aspects of the festival. The merriment ceremonies thereafter continue till dawn.

Dramatic Content of the *Idju* Festival

As has been noted above, the *Idju* festival is celebrated with elaborate spectacles such as dance, mock heroic duel, mime, ritual, music, songs as well as other artistic renditions that commemorate some of the historical feats of the ancestors and significant events that typify the people's cultural milieu. On the first day preceding the festival, the *Osedjɔ* (Chief priest) who wears a mixed red and white garment, painted with animal blood, enters the *Owhurie* sacred shrine with his back. He collects a kola-nut from a wooden bowl and offers prayers for the community and everyone present in the sacred room and thereafter announces the commencement of the festival. He continues the ritual by breaking parts of the kola-nut into smaller pieces, which he drops under the altar table and throws the remainder on the wooden bowl/ceramic plate. As he performs this ritual, he pauses at intervals and offers some prayers and chants to the gods. After this, he picks up a lobe of the kola-nut and chews as the bowl/ceramic plate is passed round the shrine for adherents to collect a piece. At this stage, the *Osedjɔ* beats a drum in a dramatic manner as if to welcome the *Owhurie* deity to the affairs of the day. Here, the *Osedjɔ* acts as the deity's advocate. During this interval, there is the blowing of the traditional whistle; a whistle made from the horn of an antelope while the drum continues in the background. This done, the supplicant then steps forward and presents his or her case before the *Owhurie* deity. After uttering some words, he greets the *Osedjɔ* (chief priest) thus:

Supplicant:	Olowu-Edje	Olowu-Edje
Qsedjò:	Kada	I am with you 2x
Supplicant:	Mi se Owhurie o	I worship Owhurie
Qsedjò:	He!	Yes! 2x
Supplicant:	Køyen oḡba re?	Am I on the right track?
Qsedjò	He!	Yes!
Supplicant:	Whu whu...!	Victory...!
All:	Eghwe whu...!	All along...!

Each ritual performance here is punctuated by dramatic pauses and mimicry. This ritual performance helps to foreground the dramatic impulses of the festival. This is why Soyinka (1988:203) avers that “drama draws on other art forms for its own survival and extension.” Here, the Qsedjò acts as the link between the living and the ancestors.

As earlier observed, the Agbarha-Ame people have a keen sense of organized and stylized representation of actions. Various anthropological research studies have shown that there are without doubt theatrical contents in all societies’s festivals, past and present, involving all three of the essential elements of theatre, namely; audience, impersonation and dialogue. It is in this regard that M.J.C. Echeruo (2014:169) argues that “festival is a celebration, and drama is a re-enactment of life”. Like the earliest Greek drama which is centred on impersonation, dialogue and audience, the *Idju* festival possesses poignant contents of impersonation, spoken language/dialogue and flamboyant display of spectacle, dance as well as rituals. Although the ritual performance is less significant, one “need only contrast this with the various rites and festivals of the coastal and riverine peoples of West Africa, where both religious observances and economic practicalities of the same activity have taken on, over the centuries, a distinctly dramatic orderings (Soyinka, 1988:197).

One of the dramatic contents of the *Idju* festival is the audience. Audience or spectators constitute the major dramatic signifier of the *Idju* festival. Firstly, the arena is arranged in a manner where an up-

per stage is erected, facing the entrance of the shrine to the left and a temporary Owhurie altar directly facing the shrine to the right. This is done in order for the elders and other invited dignitaries who make up the audiences/spectators to have a clear view of the entire performances. Other spectators are made to stand or sit at various vantage points of the arena where they can also have an unobstructed view of the performances. This is done because the audiences/spectators are the ones for whom the performances are targeted to please. During the dance procession session where cutlasses are displayed (*agada-efa*) in a mock duel, spectators, comprising of visitors and family relations of individual performers, crowd the arena to watch and cheer them on while others play different roles such as clapping of hands, drumming and singing. This is so because the festival is not only celebrated for its aesthetic displays but also serves as a means of preserving the cultural heritage of the people. It is against this background that Echeruo contends that drama "in its very manifestations, including its ritual manifestations, is very specifically communal in character". He notes further that more "than any of the other arts, [drama] requires a group audience at all stages of enactment; quite often, in fact, it demands the participation of the audience in the action of song" (2014:168). During its celebration, the Agbarha-Ame people in other parts of Nigeria and in the Diaspora, make efforts to attend the ceremony, thereby making the *Idju* festival a platform for family and cultural re-union of the people.

Another aspect of ritual performance in the *Idju* festival is the slaughtering of animals. The purpose is to use the blood of the animals to cleanse the sins of the people. This is an expression of the relationship between the people and their gods that acts as their protector and provider. During the sacrificial process of the *Idju* festival, a tensed atmosphere significantly pervades the environment. Will the animal's head be severed in a single blow of the cutlass? The suspense is increased because, should it go otherwise, the entire processes have failed and it may portend disaster for the kingdom. But

when successful, there is celebration and dance displays. Thereafter, the severed goat head is handed over to the Olotu who drinks the fresh blood as a mark of heroism at the same time uttering appropriate chants:

Olotu: Mi se Owthurie o	Olotu: I worship Owthurie
All: He!	All: Yes!
Olotu: Mi se Owthurie o	Olotu: I worship Owthurie
All: He!	All: Yes!
Olotu: Koyen ogbare?	Olotu: Am I on the right track?
All: He!	All: Yes!
Olotu: Koyen ogbare?	Olotu: Am I correct?
All: He!	All: Yes!
Olotu: Whu whu!	Olotu: Whu whu!
All: Eghwewhu!	All: Eghwewhu!

This accounts for why Echeruo (2014:169) believes that “drama flourishes best in a community which has satisfactorily transformed ritual into celebration and converted the mythic structure of action from the religious and priestly to the secular plane.” As he notes further, in “Greek and similar societies, drama, as festival, reinforces common values, shared bonds and common taboos. It re-established links with the past and compels the living to participate in hilarity and comradeship of a communal happening” (2014:169). The ritual performances outlined above, though distinct from drama in its actual context as indeed Echeruo notes, gives us a sense of a religious ritual incorporating impersonation as well as spectacle which is the hallmark of the *Idju* festival.

Soyinka’s comments in his chapter, “Theatre in African Traditional Cultures: Survival Patterns” in *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* is very instructive on the issues of the place of ritual in traditional drama. Although Soyinka believes that drama must be associated with the environment that gave birth to it, he contends that the history of theatrical professionalism in Nigeria

and elsewhere can be found in funeral rites and rituals. He cites the case of the funeral rites that was associated with the burial rituals of the Oyo king as constitutive of theatrical engagement in traditional culture. According to him, "what started out – probably – as a ritualistic ruse to effect the funeral obsequies of an Oyo king had, by the mid-century (19th), evolved into a theatrical form in substance and practice" (1988:191). In other words, drama and ritual possess certain performance features, though distinct, that add to the spectacle and aesthetic grandeur of traditional theatre. Soyinka's assessment of the theatrical nuances that characterised the dramatic aesthetics of the plays of Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola, and Duro Ladipo shows that rituals played significant roles in their development. According to him, "rituals appeared with greater frequency and masquerades became a frequent feature – often, it must be added, as gratuitous insertions" (1988:202).

Another important dramatic content of the *Idju* festival is the mock cutlass dance duel. This is the most significant aspect of the festival. As has been noted earlier, each participant is armed with a cutlass and dressed in a flowing skirt (*buluku*) impersonating their ancestors in ancient times whose military garments are traditional skirts (*buluku*) accompanied by amulets and talisman of varying metaphysical potent. With their faces fiercely and variously smeared with charcoal and kaolin, each participant marches menacingly towards another, clicks his cutlass against each other in a mock heroic duel—impersonating a war situation where the community warlords engage enemies from neighbouring communities. During an interval, a participant bursts out of the crowd to boast of his might, daring any fatherless enemy to come and engage him in a battle of death:

Irhawo... komu...!

Eravwen o je ɔse e vwo oo oo... komu...!

Imeri oo oo ... komu...!

e.t.c.!

After the chant, he marches menacingly to engage the others in the cutlass-clanking dance. This is the stage where the youths test their manhood in terms of endurance and resilience. This is the parallel that Charles Nnolim (2010:139) draws when he avers with regard to the Igbo masquerade mock duel during a festival that: "although wrestling played a large part in the traditional endeavours of Igbo youths, it was, in fact, minor to masquerading". As he puts it further, "although the quality of Igbo manhood was tested in the wrestling arena, it was more so in the masquerade cult."

Sometimes things get rowdy as opposing participants clash resulting in physical combat with others coming in to restore decorum. The participants clank their cutlasses against those of others with great strengths, imitating actions of serious warfare that sometimes an unprepared participant is hurt and led out of the arena. These imitations of actions of warfare are the indices of what constitutes the peoples' cultural dramaturgy. This is where Aristotle's reference to drama as a "mimetic process", that is, an imitation of an action becomes relevant. Ola Rotimi (2014:93) explains that the standard acceptance of the term drama within a cultural setting, at any rate, implies "an action... or of a person or persons in action, the ultimate object of which is to edify or to entertain." The *agada-efa* (cutlass clanking) battle by the participants represents the actions, conflicts and landmark victories the people have achieved since the creation of the Owhurie deity and this is very significant to the people. To use the words of Rotimi, "without necessarily probing into the historical or mythological source of this act, one recognizes points of conflict, mock conflict, true, but in essence, conflict" (2014:80). "Mimetic action," in the context of the *Idju* festival is the organized presentation of festival procession, mock heroic dance and cutlass-clanking displays, which are very significant to the people. In other words, activities that reveal in their style of presentation, in their purpose, and value, evidence of imitation, enlightenment and or entertainment, could be said to be dramatic. This is

perhaps synonymous to the point made by E. Goffman (1976:93) in his article, "Performance," when he says: "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers has some influence on the observers." .

The Agbarha-Ame dramaturgy can thus be described as a combination of traditional and performing arts in a cultural milieu which contains mimetic impersonation either of human actions or of spiritual essence. In other words, it comprises of traditional dramatic content such as dance displays, music, as well as secular performances. This stems from the fact that the festival integrates all the features of what constitute typical African religion and secular theatre. It is an understanding of this essence of what we might call "African theatre" that probably inspired M. Bauhan (1976:72) to declare which that:

The most important point to make is that African theatre has developed without major restrictions placed upon it by physical limitations, or time barriers, such as traditionally proscribe form and length of much European and American theatre. .

Thus, the *Idju* festival continues bi-annually without end, embellished with styles and grandeur each time it is performed. The performance cannot be said to be definite in style as each performance is unique with its own aesthetics, colours, music, dance, costumes, spectacles and audience.

Poetic Contents of the *Idju* Festival

The poetic content of the *Idju* festival constitutes the core element of the dramatic aesthetics of the festival. As earlier stated, the song and music with religious themes and ideas are essential qualities which not only instigate an enthralling performance by the participants, but thrill the audience/spectators who get fascinated by the calculated and punctuated movement of the *Qsedjo* who articulates

his incantations and chants to the rhythmic flow of the songs. The poetry in traditional African festivals is codified in songs, chants and incantations. All these along with processional hymns constitute the prime artistic grandeur that comes alive during the *Idju* festival celebration. It is occasioned by dance-drama, music and drumming. As Kofi Awoonor (1974:17) puts it, "In the mood and the cadences of the drums, and in the structure of songs, we come face to face with the form and content of original poetry." And in the words of Clark (2014:80-81), ".....music, dance, and poetry have been the constants of true Nigerian drama from the earliest birth-marriage-and-death-cycle ceremonies and rituals to our own trials by error of today." .

In the *Idju* festival, there are plenty of songs, chants, incantations and recitals like other African traditional festivals that are deeply religious. It celebrates dramatic and poetic aesthetics. These are perceived through the people's consensual notions of aesthetic grandeur, which can be verbalized and expressed with dance steps, music, hand clapping, gestures as well as facial expressions. In fact, songs play an important role in the entire festival period. The songs are composed to praise the heroic deeds of the people's ancestors and all those who have fought wars to defend the people's territorial integrity. For instance, at the first appearance of the Olotu (Field marshal) from the shrine, the song below may be intoned:

Olotu jẹ ọmọ uwowwin	Olotu sends a child an errand
Ko ono vwe unu gbe ta o	Whoever gossips about it
Hwere kufia o	Is killed piecemeal
Ko ono je uwe!	For he is foolish!

The Olotu is the highest ranking and most respected military institution of the people. In ancient times, he may have gone to war and defeated warriors from other kingdoms whose heads are believed to be used as cups! He may have also killed a wild animal like lion or leopard with bare hands or knife. A warrior of this stature must be feared and respected. His orders must be obeyed and carried

out to the letters. Hence the personage of the Olotu is celebrated as the defender and field marshal of the people. Therefore, if he sends a child on an errand nobody dares gossip about it.

Some of the songs are meant to spur the young ones to heroism while others draw their attention to the fact that they are from a stock of fearless warriors. Moreover, as each community approaches Otovwodo, the traditional headquarters of the kingdom, they sing songs composed in praise of heroic feats done by warlords or field marshals from their clans. For instance, the people of Igbudu community may approach the arena with the song:

He! Tobona tobona o	Behold! From all angles
He! Tobona tobona	Marvellous! From all directions
Essi muẹ agada vwe Ugbenu	Essi wields his cutlass at Ugbenu
Ugbenu ruẹ okọ shuẹ	Ugbenu warriors ran into their boats
Essi ruẹ otafe	Essi is in town
Iwhoo!	Behold! Death!

This song expresses the colossus stature of Chief Sam Warri Essi, a one-time field marshal of the Agbarha-Ame kingdom whose reign brought peace to the land. This song is performed with the accompaniment of drums and the blowing of whistle-horns (Ọgbon) with participants wielding cutlasses and other dangerous weapons in a calculated and synchronised warring footsteps. Whenever it is performed, the peoples' spirits are charged and they dance in enthusiastic moods.

Others may approach the arena with songs that show collectivity and solidarity:

Orua igbe yo	This is a war song
Igbe kọ rẹ orua	It is a communal war song
Orua igbe rẹ ofovwin o	This is a communal war song
Igbe kọ rẹ orua	It is a communal war song

This song for instance, is performed to herald the spirit of solidarity that once pervaded the entire kingdom. In time past, whenever a

settlement was at war, the entire kingdom was at war. Hence whenever this war song is intoned, the people engage in mock heroic duel of cutlass-clanking and fierce dance movements.

Many of the *Idju* songs are laced with vivid/battle images, all aimed at re-enacting significant events in the peoples' history. There is also the use of repetition which helps in emphasizing the importance of the festival. For instance, another group entering the arena with her *Osa* (a raffia-decorated burning basket with a boy of about four years old) guarded by heavily armed warriors, would intone thus:

Uvo keke	In broad day light
Uvo gbala	Behold! A broad day light
Mi muẹ orọwọn rode	I carried a sacred object
Uvo gbala	Behold! A broad day light

These songs are part of the dramatic scenes of the *Idju* festival. The events are usually spectacles to behold when considered against the exchanges between the youths who wield their cutlasses in war-ringing fashion and the *Ọsedjọ* (chief priest) of the *Owhurie* deity who displays in alluring fashion traditional chants and incantations of the people. The aesthetic dexterity is informed by the *Ọsedjọ's* dramatic movement to the admiration of all. It is against the above rubric that Bakery Troary (1972:26) concludes that African festivals are endowed with "great and elaborate spectacles such as dance, music, songs, recitals, and masquerades, all happening in one ceremony with a high degree of balance, unity, dance and rhythm." It should be noted here that all the songs rendered during the festival are war songs (*ile-ofowin*).

Another spectacular song-dance-drama that constitutes the poetic content of the *Idju* festival is that performed by the *Igbus* (warlords). This song which is punctuated by a drum language is a re-enactment of events in time past. It involves many verbal, non-

verbal and paralinguistic gestures. The song is composed to celebrate the strengths and powers of the warriors who are always battle ready.

The song opens with vigorous drumming thus:

Olekuku wa dje	Pidgins should disperse
Ede re ohonre te re	The day of battle is here
<i>(repeated several times.)</i>	

By the dramatic use of body language, voice, pause, tempo, gesture, and other paralinguistic techniques, the song is energized into a warm and living experience. An experience through which the audience/spectators spontaneously identify and by which they exhibit various degrees of participation through encouraging applause and ululating grunts.

Another aspect of the poetic content of *Idju* festival is the use of chants and incantations during visual offerings by the Qsedjo (Chief Priest). Chant is a stylized form of speech or music which has many features of song. The *Idju* festival begins with a consultation by the various family head with the chief priest. During the ritual ceremony, the chief priest invites the ancestors to witness the activities of the day and pray for a successful festival. Here, the entire process is suffused with visual chants and stylized incantation to exercise the power of the ancestors and the Owhorie deity. The Qsedjo starts his divination in the following manner:

Qsedjo: Mi se Owthurie o	Owthurie I greet you
Mi se Owthurie o	Owthurie I salute you
Edẹ na te nu re o	The day has come
Edẹ e ve phiyo ta nu re	The agreed date has come
Je avwanre riẹn e be eka phia	Tell us how it will look like
Ebe wo ve o qyen avwanre ruẹ na	We are working as you directed
O re ufuoma	It is for good
O ke yowwin	It will be good
Ohwo o ta re o yovweẹn	Whoever says otherwise

E jo ghwre urhie	Let him drown in the river
Ebe a rien ru oyen a ruẹ	We are performing our tradition
Ra vwe ọke emọ	As it was in the olden days
Iruaru re e kpako fuoma	Tradition is for our good
Ọ rọ ta re ne oma fu avwanre	Whoever says we will live
E je oma fuo	Let him live also
Ohwo ọ ta re o yovween	Whoever says otherwise
E jo ghwre evun aghwa the forest	Let the deviant get missing in the forest
Koyen ogba re?	Hope it is correct?
All: He!	Yes!
Qsedjo: Koyen ogba re?	Hope it is correct?
All: He!	Yes!
Qsedjo: Whu whu...!	Victory...!
All: Eghwe whu...!	All along...!

As soon as this is chanted, the elders nod their heads in agreement to the prayers, after which kola-nuts and drinks are served round to every one present. After this solemn performance in the village square, the group takes a procession to the shrine of Owhurie deity. As the procession gains momentum, religious songs are chanted accompanied by vigorous hand clapping, while at the same time, a youth with a specialised skill blows the traditional whistle made from the horn of an antelope – punctuating at interval with the rhythmic beats of the drum. It is against this backdrop that Beverly J. Stoeltje (1992:261) asserts that African festivals “occur at cylindrical regulated intervals, are public in nature, participatory in ethos, complex in structure, and multiple in voice, scene, and purpose.” If this is so, J.N. Amankulor (2014:156) argues, that the onus that rests upon the shoulder of the African, is for him/her to “return to the

roots of culture and back to the realm of tradition, ritual and religion". Because in this sphere, "there are great potentials in African music, drama, art and religion."

The *Idju* festival thus provides the avenue for the people to make supplications to "Oghene" (supreme God) for preserving their lives and granting them peace and prosperity in the land. It also serves as a platform for the people to rejuvenate and reaffirm their loyalty to the ancestor and protect their common values. The sheer display of ostentatious dance steps, dramatic movements, grunts, with appropriate chants and incantations by the priest as well as the vigorous hand clapping ushering in and closing the pageantry display of the *Idju* festival are intrinsic aspects of the artistic and aesthetic underpinnings embedded in the content of the festival.

The *Idju* festival, therefore, brings together diverse elements of entertainment and communication, including cutlass-clanking displays, dance, song, music, mime, among others. It presents a series of events that reinforce common values, shared bonds and common taboos among the Agbarha-Ame people.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the *Idju* festival, like any other traditional festival in Africa, is an important cultural practice that compares with the elements and contents of modern theatre. The Agbarha-Ame dramaturgy, like any form of cultural expression, is based on the people's world view and aesthetics. This is because theatre derives its nature and credibility from the society in which it is performed. In other words, the entire events associated with the festival constitute colourful dramatic enactments that artistically present as well as project certain aspects of the people's cultural heritage. This essay has also established that virtually every aspect of the *Idju* festival has audiences who watch performances elaborate procession, music, hands clapping as well as display of mock heroic

duel of cutlass-clanking to enact heroic feats of years past. These rites are often repeated just as it is done in modern dramatic situation. These acts of dance impersonation, chants and incantations are nothing but conscious art of worship without which there can be no performance for pleasure. Richard Shechuer (1977:23) captures the entire essence of performance in traditional setting as the “whole constellation of events that take place in both performers and audience from the time the first spectator enters the field of performance where theatre takes place to the time the last spectator leaves.” Hence, I described the Agbarha-Ame dramaturgy as a combination of traditional and performing arts in a cultural milieu which contains mimetic impersonation either of human actions or of spiritual essence.

This essay thus contributes to the existing knowledge of Urhobo traditional festivals. The festival’s drama and poetry project the people’s worldview and identity; they assess moral character and the aspiration of the group against the universal standard of Urhobo traditional ethics. The study promotes knowledge and appreciation of Urhobo traditional drama and poetry beyond the confines of Urhoboland, thereby contributing to emerging heritage of traditional drama and poetry in Nigeria. Furthermore, the explication of the various dramatic and poetic contents of the *Idju* festival provide fresh ideas and insights that can generate further research into other forms of Urhobo cultural festivals and other traditions of cultural displays in Nigeria.

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