

The Aesthetics and Cultural Relevance of the Ier Ritual Festival Among the Tiv of Central Nigeria

by

Awuawuer Tijime Justin, Ph.D.

awuajust@yahoo.com

Department Of Dramatic Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University

Ile-Ife, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper focuses on *Ier*, a ritual festival mostly practiced by the Masev sub-geneology of the Tiv people of central Nigeria that is almost going extinct, and a product of the writer's interviews of elders who are knowledgeable of the workings of the festival. With this information, the paper attempts to analyse moral values of the event as well as assessing the socio-cultural impact of the ritual performance that can become a model for solving the problems. Thus, the paper is poised to demonstrate the nexus between the *Ier* performance and societal development by appraising what constitute the core of this performance, and how it could be a general reference for African theatre traditions.

Introduction

A social anthropologist and structuralist, Victor Turner pioneered the study of ritual as performance or theatre in the 1960s and 1970s following from Arnold van Gennep's work on rites of passage. Turner's *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969) is still considered a seminal work in the fields of religious studies, theatre and performance studies, anthropology, and sociology. In 1966, Turner delivered the Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures at the University of Rochester, a significant portion of which became *Ritual Process*. In this performance, he laid out his thesis on ritual suggested by the title as a process, a thesis still in vogue in emerging fields like ritual, theatre, and performance studies by figures such as Richard Schechner. For Richard Schechner (2002) Rituals are collective memories encoded into actions. Rituals also help people deal with difficult transitions, ambivalent relationships, hierarchies, and desires that trouble, exceed, or violate the norms of daily life.

Victor Turner (1981 xii) in a Forward to Schechner's book, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (1985) states that:

Schechner opened up for my study a new world of performative techniques. Anthropologists, by their training, are not qualified to investigate the training of actors in ritual, ritualized theatre, and more secular types of cultural performance—how they prepare for the public events, how they transmit performative knowledge, how they dress, mask, and apply cosmetics, their personal "shtick," that is, attention-getting devices unique to each performer. Anthropologists are more concerned with *stasis* than with *dynamis*, with texts, institutions, types, protocols, "wiring," custom, and so on than with the *how* of performance, the shifting, evanescent, yet sometimes utterly memorable relationships that develop unpredictably among actors, audience....

Ritual performance thus is an important aspect of Tiv worldview within the socio-religious context and a veritable channel for the interpretation of Tiv culture and symbolic meanings. This is probably because ritual symbolism in Tiv society like most societies involves beliefs, customs, traditions, norms, attitudes and material objects associated with them to give an authentic meaning to cultural traits. Some of these culture traits include arts, cultural symbolism, body decoration, facial scarification, festivals, dances, and initiation and funeral rites (Ushe 2011, 32). Holding strongly based on the ritual interpretation, any semiotics of performance must start from, and always stand unsteadily on, these unstable slippery bases, made even more uncertain by the continually shifting receptions of various audiences regarding social orientations.

Because performances are usually subjunctive, liminal, dangerous, and duplicitous, they are often hedged in with conventions and frames: ways of making the places, the participants, and the events somewhat safe. In these relatively safe make-believe precincts, actions can be carried to extremes, even for fun (Richard Schechner 1977).

Thus, the motivation for this paper is to locate its thesis within the ambiance of aesthetic form and content of the *Ier* ritual performance which is a manifestation of the Tiv worldview within the realm of morality in relation to *Akombo*, a magico-religious observance that is bountifully celebrated through a procession ritual carnival. Godwin Yina (2012) concludes that understanding a discourse of this nature is a pragmatic way of understanding the harmonious link between the sacred and the profane; the divine and the mundane; the supernatural and the material worlds in Tiv cosmology.

The interpretation here is that the uniqueness of the Tiv world must be constantly kept in mind in order to grasp the bases for their daily interactive behavior, philosophy, psychology, and mind set. Indeed, the peculiarities of Tiv religion, their judicial principles and justice, their egalitarian social structure, their courageous disposition and independence of mind, their collective sensibilities are all entrenched in the quality of their daily interactive discourses, which match the attitudinal patterns.

To Rupert East (2003. 199-200) to the vast majority of the Tiv people, these practices are nothing but an empty formula, of which true meaning has been forgotten. Before the influence of western civilization and some patterns of external interactions started to creep into the society clear-cut practices of marriage and burial customs among the Tiv were well known in their society. Specific roles, rights, expectations, obligations and even sanctions were prescribed and strictly maintained. Hence, theatre was and is used as a potent carrier of the traditional values and norms in Tiv society.

Contextualizing *Ier* Ritual Festival

Ier is a special and an important fertility ritual performance found amongst the Masev sub-genealogy of the Tiv nation. The origin of *Ier* has remained essentially speculative with no part in Tiv or Masev laying claim of its origin. What one can boast of concerning the origin of *Ier* is that *Ier* is connected to the group of fertility rites among the Masev people in Tivland, that their origin is undoubtedly directed towards acquiring the goodwill of the ancestors, and their favourable co-operation in the affair of the living (Ordugh Gbe, oral interview). From various oral interviews conducted, *Ier* ritual came to being when the Masev people sought to ceremoniously purge their daughters when they were pregnant expressing their wealth and dignity, but when and how it started is not traceable.

According to Alfred Akawe Torkula (www.stclements.edu/grad/gradtork.pdf) the Masev-Iharev-Nongov on the other hand had a more elaborate arrangement called *ikyar nyoron*. Under this arrangement, each woman was required to attach herself to a man within the endogamic circle in a quasi-marriage arrangement in which sexual activity was allowed – until she finally got married outside her endogamic circle. Her partner prior to full marriage was called her *ikyar* and took full responsibility for her upkeep and “training” prior to full marriage. On conception in her new home (after full marriage) she returned with her husband to her parents place in order to be cleansed of all those *akombo* she must have breached while in her father’s house and with her *ikyar*. The object of the cleansing ritual was to pave way for her safe delivery. The ritual called *Ier* involved a ceremony at which both her *ikyar* and the “current” husband competed after which a he-goat was killed on the *ilyum* altar. *Ier* ritual therefore, is a combination of the sum total of all the birth Akombo (fertility rites) that appear to be an embodiment of various evil forces which may attack the human race. However, this paper does not consider *ikyar* as a qualification for *Ier* rite.

In connection also to *Ier* festival is another system associated with marriage which was the *ikyar* system literary translated ‘simple marriage’ (Ude 1993, 33), while East refers to it as companionship marriage (2003, 133), and was practiced amongst the people of Masev. Under this system a young man and woman were allowed to stay together as husband and wife for a short time with a simple understanding between the parents of the young people involved, sealed by a token amount of money. To East; “in Masev, if a girl reaches puberty and does not have male child at home she is laughed at as being not much of a woman, they said that, when she was growing up, she was not attractive that no man came near her” (2003, 133).

Ude looks at *ikyar* as being informed by the fact that; “fornication was considered a serious crime, while at same time, the unusual and uncertain period of waiting to marry was recognized as very trying, so young men and women were allowed this form of marriage” (1993, 33-34). Both East and Ude had it correctly while the *ikyar* system of marriage was inevitable. However, the version from East is an immediate factor, not the remote, while Ude’s version is remote but not final in its totality. The ultimate reason regarding the concept of *ikyar* was based on the serious concern of Tiv people to virginity. Oral tradition reveals that, virginity of a girl was a pride of the family, and as such, a wrong break of such was a sacrilege. This is a serious taboo, among others that Wang enumerated as; “incest, disvirginity, trespassing spiritual orders, and promiscuity” (2004, 10). Therefore, disvirginity was to be checked and traced; so that the *ikyoor* rite (akombo associated with birth) will be performed accordingly as the man, who breaks the virginity, must be required to bring a fowl for the completion of the rite. If this was not done, the girl would suffer from west pains and severe agony during menstrual period, which may hitherto, lead to barrenness. Based on this premium, *ikyar* was institutionalized as a moral decorum.

In addition, the philosophy of *Ier* is informed by the system of marriage in Tiv before the arrival of the Whiteman which was *Yam she* (exchanging daughters or sisters for marriage) which shall be briefly explained so as to help link it with the *Ier* performance. According to East:

In the past, the Tiv did not have the many different forms of marriage which they practiced in recent years: the only kind of marriage was by exchange, as they would not allow the name of their child to be lost to their house for any case except death. If a man had children, he wanted all of them to remain his. So if, for instance, he had two sons and three daughters, he divided the daughters amongst the sons, to give in exchange for wives, who should bear children in place of two daughters who were with their husbands that his house might expand and go forward (2003, 107).

Then *yam she* otherwise known as exchange marriage involved the “direct” exchange of sisters and was the earliest institutional system of marriage known to the Tiv. Under the system a father was required to distribute his female children amongst his male children (or brothers as the case may be) who would then use them to exchange for wives. Through this system, each male child had a sister called (*ingyor*) with which he could exchange with another person for a wife. By this exchange system therefore, a young man or an old man as it were, was able to marry only if he had a sister or daughter and found somebody who was ready to have her as a wife in exchange for his own sister or daughter. As long as your mother did not give birth to female children, you had to wait for her to do so and for the girls to attain marriageable ages. Alternatively, if your mother did not give birth to female children at all and you had a kind uncle, he could ‘lend’ his own sister or daughter to enable you marry. According to oral tradition, this ‘loan’ was payable when you later married and had daughters, you could then give one of them to the person. Even if the lender was dead, the ‘loan’ was paid to any of his male children mentioned in his death-will.

With this system, it was possible for someone to stay without a wife for a very long time or throughout his life. While other people, who had many sisters married as many wives as they desired. This situation naturally bred a lot of ill-feelings and petty jealousies and wrangling even among children of the same father (Iorver Ashibi: oral interview, 2010).

These two marriage systems discussed above then, called for a necessary ‘washing’ of the woman when she finally married. This is because, in spite of the advantages of marriage by exchange system, it had problems. One obvious advantage was that, there were no cases of divorce or women leaving their husbands. Any woman who did so invited the wrath of her father or brother because the implications were clear, if your sister or daughter ran away from another man, it meant that you would also lose your wife. The problem from this system arose mainly from those who were not opportuned to have sisters to exchange for wives. Yet, others had many sisters and married as many wives as they wanted, thus displaying the highest level of selfishness as far as the people were concerned.

Those who did not have were jealous, and in certain situations, the people who ‘borrowed’ sisters from others refused to ‘pay’ back when the time came for them to do so. This again bred a lot of trouble within the society. The resultant effect was that, every woman was susceptible to various *akombo* (Ude 1993, 34).

Most of which led to infertility, short married lives, barrenness, bedridden, and given birth to blind, deaf or dumb children. This was why *Ier* ritual performance was needed to cleanse the woman when she finally married and became pregnant.

Theatre Aesthetics in Ier Ritual Carnival

For Schellekens Elisabeth (2007), to philosophize about questions in Aesthetics or Morality is primarily to reflect upon and scrutinize value. Aesthetic and moral value, perhaps more than any other kinds of value, answer to our sense of what we consider to be of genuine importance in life, the kind of persons we want to become, and what aims we deem truly meaningful. Aesthetic and moral issues are both deeply intertwined with our relations to other persons (past, present and future), not merely in terms of thought, action and reaction, but also in respect of the opportunities we want to enable them to have and the kind of experiences we want to be available to them. This follows that there is an identification of human aesthetics as virtuous artistic skills that are cultivated, recognized, and admired via nonutilitarian pleasure with the presence of artistic objects and performances under satisfying convention and composition that place them in a recognizable style. People in this regards make points of judging, appreciating, and interpreting works of art that simulate experiences set aside from the ordinary that make a dramatic focus of the experience.

Though, this philosophy of aesthetics has been criticized by some sociologists and writers about art and society. Many scholars argued that there is no unique aesthetic object but a continuum of cultural forms from ordinary speech that experiences are signaled as art by a frame, institution or special event. Thus, the aesthetics in *Ier* festival are anchored on the social and spiritual demands of the Tiv people presenting a spectrum of aesthetic behaviour in festival form to achieve a communication that is socially worthwhile. Generally speaking, all theatrical productions have certain aesthetics in common: the performer or performers, their acting in space (usually some sort of stage) and time (some limited duration of performance), costumes and make up, and a producing process and organization. Certainly, there are types of theatrical performance that entail ritual and magic which *Ier* performance is also part and parcel.

Thus, the work of the performers in *Ier* performance could be seen or viewed in the sense where the performers are seen under a spectacular exhibition of particular physical actions, including vocal (musics, songs and dances from the paternal relatives, the *Ikyar* group and the the husband's relatives that are spectacular) and some theatricalities by the *Ier* priest that seems extraordinary. The Dances are presented to the audience by the two groups- from the husband's side and the *ikyar*. These dances are energetic and rigorous to reflect the mood of the day, and are presented at the same time to determine the winner; this also lasts till twilight when all groups finally retire back to their various places.

Ier ritual is also one of such rituals that have so many dramatic and theatrical elements like songs, dance, music, costume parade, and other side attractions. Thus in performance, *Ier* is highly secularized involving general spectators and visitors who attend to watch and participate in the performances as the case may be. These categories of participants play the role of audience, though not a box office audience as it is the case in the western theatre tradition.

The next theatricality in *Ier* is the mimetic skills, in which physical states and activities are simulated by the women folk in the *Ier* carnival as they make allusions to their husbands and the ancestors of the land. The next stage of the theatrical feature is when both the husband and the *ikyar* (the man who had a simple marriage with the lady), take the stage and there is a mock beauty contest. If the *ikyar* wins, as it almost always happened, he is allowed to hold hands with the woman and walk round the arena, hailed by his kinsmen. The contest is moderated by an orator of the community who has learnt it as an art. But at the end of the walking around, the woman returns to her real husband.

There are also imaginative exploration and improvization of fictitious situations as mostly, the women from the ladies' relatives act out funny things that relate to the relationship between husbands and wives, most of them acting out the roles of men as it is always the case. Again, in *Ier* performance, there is an exhibition characterization of patterns of human behaviour that are not natural to the actor especially the priest who is always in trance while performing on the woman to be purged, and there are spontaneous interaction, while engaging in these ritual activities. In addition, on the final day, the secular aspect starts after the stream ritual with dances from the *ikyar* group and is watched by the people.



The lady to be cleansed is costumed by paternal women.

Specifically, the aesthetic activities of *Ier* festival is firstly, experienced on the final day of *Ier* festival where the ‘washing’, sacred ritual takes place late afternoon. Here the *Ier* priest using some leaves, he dips in water from a hole dug in the ground. This by aesthetics is symbolic of a river that is meant to wash down the iniquities that might have befall on the woman to be washed. Just like most christian churches do baptize believers in rivers or streams, the *Ier* principal actors firmly believe that this water is potent and capable of solving their urgent needs. Whlie sprinkling the woman to be washed with this water, the *Ier* priest chants the following incantations:

Ibo sen, Isho kondo
Ibo sen, Isho londo
Iyange wan nomso
Uwer wan kwase
Mnenge anenge ga
Oon we nyiane
Akombo a Tiv cica cii.

Translated:

Guilt flow down, Innocence flow up
Guilt flow down, Innocence flow up
The sun, the male child
The moon, the female child
I am not doing the art by imitation
I wash you here today
Of all evil forces in Tiv.

This incantation is aesthetically informed against the Tiv legends and myths about their ancestors and gods, who are the agents of fertility and destruction which, are developed out of the original common mythology of the people that constitutes the primary source of the intuitive knowledge in the Tiv worldview. The last rite is carried out by an elderly woman past the age of having sex with any man. The woman washes the lady of any mysterious forces that relate to sterility under the emblem of *akoov a saen* (the *akombo* that is concerned with human reproduction for both men and women). The aesthetic experiences during the secular aspect of the *Ier* ritual also begins on the first day when both son- in- law and the *ikyar* fire guns indicating that they have been invited for a very important occasion. Both men invite their kinsmen and prepare seriously for the final day of the ritual performance.

They all prepare dance groups and buy presents for the woman. On the night of *abiin-* eve of the performance. The *ikyar* stays awake all night with his kins relatives; elders, age mates and younger ones who have taken an *ikyar* while in their prime to go round the hamlets of the land conducting a dance as *agede*. They compose songs which they sing all night to appeal to the woman to whom their brother fell in love during his prime. These songs are rather lamentation for the loss of such a woman to another man which are poetic and emotional in rendition. Another aesthetic feature in the *Ier* ritual festival is a situation where the priest uses some akombo accessories known as *chighligh-ate*, a sack containing all the *akombo* of the Tiv people. *Chighligh-ate* therefore beomes a special object of interest during the *Ier* festival as the people consider it as a potent tool for actualizing the ritualistic aim of the festival thereby becoming a point of focus.

The Cultural Relevance of Ier Ritual Carnival

According to Sally A. Ness,

Theories of ritual performance that have focused on the capacity of symbolic action to bring about states of possession or communion with supernatural beings fall into this Iconic category. So do those that foreground and document the mimetic or imitative capabilities of ritual gestures and dance movements. So also do those that identify in ritual performance the reproduction and/or re-presenting of highly valued qualities or social characters, such as “grace” or “cool-ness,” as the main consequence of a performance. Iconic approaches emphasize, sometimes to the exclusion of all other kinds of meaningfulness, “one-in-spirit,” or “connecting-in-like-ness” kinds of signifying capabilities, as they are observed to be evident in ritual performance (2007, 17).

Ier ritual performance is thus an affirmation of the collective will and the communal philosophy of the Tiv people. Amankulor maintains that traditional festival goes beyond masking and alienation as it negates all forms of disenchantments with societal norms in favour of the collective ideal (Dauda and Akoh 2001, 119). Therefore, *Ier* performance serves a means of retooling and rejuvenating the socio-political fabrics of the Tiv (Masev) community.

In addition, and more significantly, there exists a mutual relationship between rituals/theatre and the society. “the focus of this relationship is change” (Doki 2001, 114). Therefore, ritual encompasses all the indices of development in the society such as politics, economy and religion.

This explains why a point has been made earlier in this study that, the breaking of moral codes in Tiv requires a certain ritual to set the *tar* right, thus, setting the *tar* right is aimed at preparing the *tar* (society) for good administration, good harvest, procreation and total communion between the people and the extraterrestrial world or the ancestors. This is because ‘breaking’ such a code, the individual (the culprit) and the family of which he is part, is set against the rest of the community. Harmonious co-existence is lost and must necessarily be regained through ritual observation. As a people-oriented institution, *Ier* ritual expresses an appreciation of life and penchant for this life as incorporated in various songs, myths and legends. *Ier* festival therefore, is an appropriate festival theatre as it is channelled religiously towards; cleansing/fortification, fertility, and edification.

According to Akile Gbande, an *Ier* ritualist: “any child who is a product of *Ier* ritual is automatically fortified of all the *akombo* at the same time and stands to be ever healthy and never to die in his or her prime” (oral interview 2009). *Ier* ritual is designed to “wash” (cleanse) the lady concerned of all *akombo* (mysterious forces) that she may have “fallen” into right from the day of her birth to the day of “washing”. The cleansing takes place when the lady or woman is pregnant for between five and nine months (Akile gbande, Mkaanem Akpeda: oral interview 2009).

The essence of the cleansing is also to prevent the child to be born from infliction of the mother’s transgressions. Ude holds it that; “the Tiv believe that, a mother inflicted by *akombo* can transfer it to the children if not ‘washed’ through *Ier* ritual performance” (1993, 32). The purging of *akombo* in a ceremonial form, and it is one of the most significant traditional pomp found among the Masev in Tiv society. It is a marriage oriented rite in the sense that it is performed with a wife whom a man found favour with, while in her prime with the consent of the parents.

This explanation of *Ier* here shows that *Ier* ritual is only performed within the people of Masev, though; some people claim that, other parts of the Tiv society also perform it; however they have not come out with evidence to support their claim, as such the *Ier* ritual is only practiced within the Masev people. On the issue of associating this rite to only to a woman that had had *ikyar* (simple marriage) alone is not authentic. This is because the writer himself attended an *Ier* festival where the bride was not involved in the *ikyar* marriage system. Mpalegh in his article maintains that:

Ier is related to the concept of *akombo* rite that is a ritual ceremony, a cleansing associated with the first pregnancy. Practiced among the Masev people of western Tivland, the ceremony is meant to cleanse the bride and the child to be born of the impurities of his mother’s people and of her *ikyar* for effective delivery (1987, 9).

The above position is sufficiently enough but the snag about it is that, it emphasizes only on the cleansing of the first pregnancy. *Ier* per se is not meant only for the first pregnancy, there are instances the researcher was able to witness an *Ier* ritual on a women that had more than three children. In addition, the consideration of *Ier* ritual is based on safe delivery and onward fertility of the purged lady. Agbatse Iorzua (2009) in an interview said; “*Ier* involves the cleansing rites for a pregnant woman and it is localized within the Masev people in Tivland, and also the process of cleansing the lady from her *ikyar* as activities in her youth”. This explanation is short and straight to the concept and cultural implication of the *Ier* ritual festival, considering the above definitions; we can therefore say that, *Ier* ritual is a purification of the marriage institution in Tivland.

More evidently, the festivals of many ethnic and national groups are credited with the preservation of unique customs, folktales, costumes, and culinary skills. In Tiv for example, secular and sacred festivals and feasts have many uses and values beyond the public enjoyment of a celebration. The *Ier* festival thus provides an opportunity for the elders to pass on folk knowledge and the meaning of tribal lore to younger generations. *Ier* festival and feast also centre on the customs of Tiv nation or ethnic group and enrich understanding of the cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The rise of christianity, western education, modernization, the impact of poliitics, growing urbanization, the steady breaking down of family ties and the challenges of modern times , etc, all have (negative) impact on Tiv people and subsequent dearth of this performance. However, *Ier*, just like any festival theatre has to do with making specific moments of importance in the life of the Tiv sociology and as a traditional institution which artistically unites the society through appeasement, continece training, cleansing, fortification and, edification via performances that are enveloped in the popular mannerisms of the secular and the sacred practice.

Thus, the issue of bracing or rebranding *Ier* festival is a Welcome development that pledges and assures an artistic resurgence that would unveil the people’s experiences to ponder on the complex socio-political disputes affecting them. This is because research has shown that Nigerian and indeed African religion and traditions are the fastest growing in the world and there is urgent need to promote more of this fact to the peoples of the world by going back to our indigenous cultural practices.

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