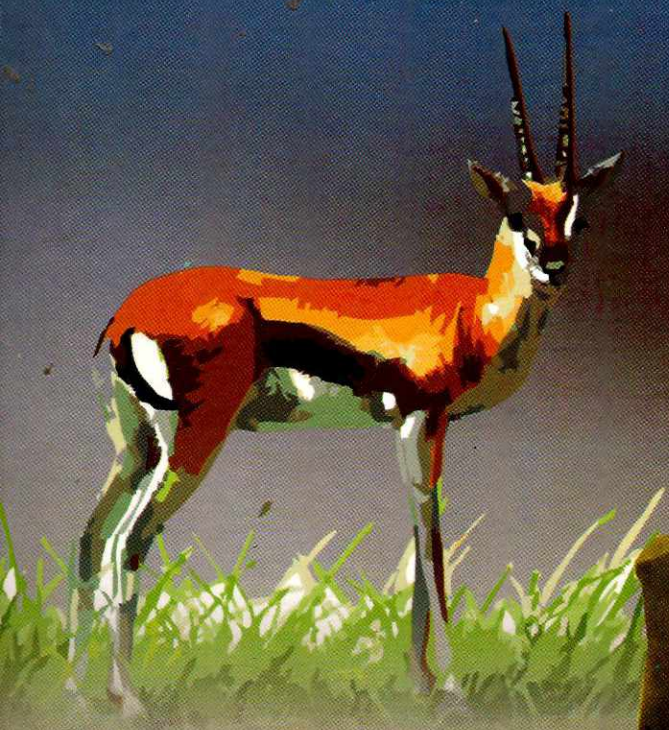


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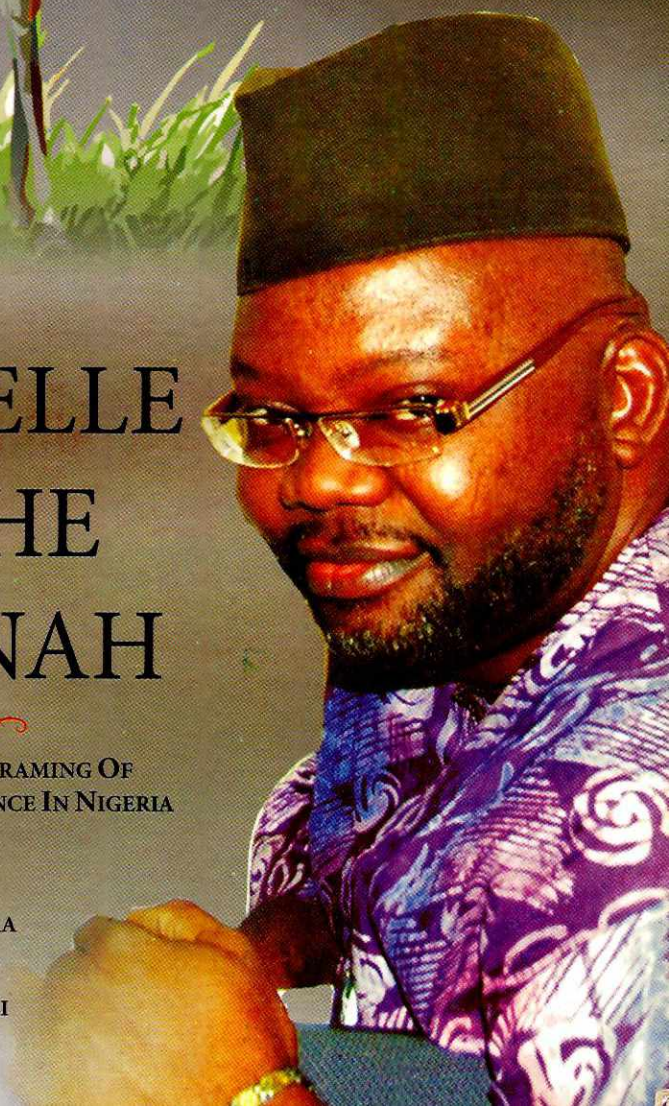
SUNDAY ODODO AND THE FRAMING OF
TECHNO-CULTURAL PERFORMANCE IN NIGERIA

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Ododo's *Vanishing Vapour* and Ebira Cultural Milieu

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Abstract

Myth is an integral part of traditional African oral culture. It forms the foundation upon which the philosophies and beliefs of a people are built. The sustenance of any given cultural ethos, to a great extent, depends on the transmission and preservation of these mythical beliefs by which the life style of the people is governed. However, many of these beliefs, which are transmitted through folklores, tales, and theatrical performances including dance, music, drama, poetry and rhetoric, are fast fading away with the advent of modernity and foreign cultural influences. This is why efforts are geared towards documenting our most valued indigenous oral culture in the face of the changing world for posterity. Therefore, this chapter explores Sunnie Ododo's *Vanishing Vapour's* account of an Ebira creation myth and its influence on the sociology of the Ebira culture in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Vanishing Vapour*, Ebira culture, Myth, Ireba, Irakwo, Folklores, Beliefs, Oral culture, Performances

Introduction

The cultural milieu, features and characteristics of any given people are usually connected to past experiences and encounters from which their given worldview and mythical beliefs are moulded. In this light, Ebira cultural milieu is rooted in the cosmology, mythical beliefs and experiences that shaped the life style of Anebira. Ebira people known as Anebira are located in the middle belt of Nigeria. The name Ebira usually brings to mind a formidable track of gallantry and victory over divers raiders and invaders all through their migration from the Kwararafa kingdom to Ebira *Opete* their present abode. Peter Ohida affirms



the gallant wading off of invaders by Anebira warriors: "In 1860s, Ebira land was exposed to the Nupe raids but the people proved a notable exception to the list of the conquests of the Bida armies" (xxx). He further explained that "the poisonous arrows of Ebira, coupled with the natural protection provided them by their hilly environment, thwarted the manoeuvres of the invaders" (xxxii). The various degrees of Ebira gallant victories over the invasion of some other larger ethnic groups and religious incursion on their land further strengthened the traditional beliefs.

The Ebira have a rich culture that embraces virtues of good character, dignity and hard work. The totality of the Ebira ways of life is constantly transmitted through various forms of contextual performances. Among other Ebira theatrical performances, Anebira are prominently known for their vibrant mask (Eku) performances. Their belief in ancestral visitation in form of masquerade is usually demonstrated within the performance paraphernalia and milieu of *Ekuechi* and *Echeane* festivals. While *Ekuechi* mask secrecy and performance is strictly a men affair, *Echeane* mask festival accommodates both male and female gender. In fact, the etymology of the name *Echeane* is in honour of the Ebira female gender. The vibrancy of the Ebira mask performance is usually a theatre to behold in terms of ritual, dramatization, music, dance, pageantry, costume and technical complements.

The mystery behind Ebira mask theatre cannot be unravelled without unmasking the genesis of creation myth and the early friction between the male and female gender as contained in Ebira oral folklore, tradition and history. The splitting differences between the women folk witchcraft oppression and men folk mask secrecy is believed to have arisen from the woman's manoeuvre of "Irakwo" the secret and mysteries of life that is originally meant to be in the possession of man. Odo's *Vanishing Vapour* recalls this creation myth and the genesis of secretcies between the male and female folks. It demonstrates the oppressive nature of witchcraft and the significant place of "Ireba" in cubing the misuse of "Irakwo" and menace of witchcraft.

Ebira Creation Myth: The Genesis of Irakwo and Emergence of Ireba

An Ebira oral creation myth has it that when *Ohomorihi*, the almighty creator of heaven and earth created man and his wife, Ohomorihi handed over the occupational tools of Edu (hoe) and Ukari (cutlass) to the man while the woman was given Okaku (thread spool) and Owu (wool). With these tools the man and his wife were instructed to make a living, replenish and dominate the earth. This explains why the Ebira is highly energetic and industrious and the primary occupation of the men is farming and hunting while their women are prominent

for their traditional fabric weaving till date. One day, while the man was busy working on his farm, Ohomorihi beckon on him but he sent his wife to heed the call of Ohomorihi on his behalf. However, the woman later refused to deliver the gift item (Irakwo) that was given to her to give to the man. This is because she opened the content on her way back and discovered that it contained the power and secrets of life. So she decided to manoeuvre Irakwo to her advantage and that marked the genesis of witchcraft in the hands of the female gender. To curb the misuse and excesses of Irakwo, Ohomorihi had to empower the man with the secrecy of *Ireba Eku* the shrine that housed the spirit of the ancestors and the power that can counter and subdue evil forces.

It is from this Ireba that ancestral spirits are invoked and they appear in form of masquerades to destroy the powers of evil forces and to deliver good tidings to the people from the almighty creator. This cosmic myth culminated in a strong traditional religious belief and was fashioned into a festival known as Ekuechi beside many other Ebira traditional theatre performances that are used to constantly echo and transmit the history of Anebira. Beside Ododo's postulation of *facekuerade* theatre base on the origin, significance, relevance and performance aesthetic of Ekuechi performance, his efforts to document and project the cultural milieu of Ebira people geared his eleven sequence libretto to dramatize Ebira creation myth which gave birth to the emergence of Irakwo and Ireba Eku and every other Ebira cultural milieu.

One may be quick to blame the emergence of witchcraft and other evil activities today on the man because he sent his wife to collect such an important item on his behalf when he could have suspend whatever he was doing to heed the call of God. On the other hand, we must not forget that man and his wife were created to be partners in progress and as such, the man never envisaged any form of negative manoeuvre by his wife. Relating this to the biblical account of creation in the second chapter of the book of Genesis, the woman is named as helpmeet to the man: "And the lord said, it is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him" (18). Unfortunately, the biblical man fell as a result of the woman accepting from Satan the forbidden fruit that God commanded them not to eat. Thus, the Ebira believe that the role of a woman in the life of a man and the entire home is crucial as her actions and attitude to life can either protect or destroy the life of a man or the home. For this reason the woman is respected as a force to reckon with in the circle of life.

Synopsis of *Vanishing Vapour*

Ododo's *Vanishing Vapour* is a plotted account and dramatization of an Ebira



creation myth with representational characters of Ohomorihi, spirit beings, man (Anataku) and woman (Aze) and other complementing characters playing vital roles in the tale believed to be the genesis of the moulding of Ebira worldview and ways of life. The play *Vanishing Vapour* is highly enriched with a great degree of Anebira cultural milieu composed of Ekuechi (strictly men affair night mask performance), Echane (mask performance that accommodates participation of both male and female gender), Ahee obe (hunters performance) and the female folk display with Enyohu artefact props associated to Ebira women. *Vanishing Vapour* projects the richness and beauty of collective number of Ebira traditional festivals and theatre that emanate from the people's tale of creation myth.

Vanishing Vapour narrates the story of how man, known as *Anataku* in the libretto, loses the power of *Irakwo*, the secrets of life to the woman known as *Aze*. *Anataku* in good faith asks his wife *Aze* to heed the call of Ohomorihi on his behalf to collect the gift of *Irakwo* for him. Unfortunately, *Aze* falls to seductive tricks of some evil creatures that influence her to join their fold and she thereby loses *Irakwo* to them. With the influencing power of the evil creatures, *Aze* introduces more women into witchcraft and they wreak havoc on the people. This eventually leaves the men with no other option than to come up with the secrecy of *Ireba* to counter the powers of the witchcraft.

Sequences one, two and three of the libretto is composed of heavenly abode activity with God almighty at the helm of affairs and his celestial beings worshiping him. Following is the interplaying event in which God gives man and his wife what they need to make a living on earth. The climax of this plot is the event whereby man sends his wife to heed the call of God on his behalf. This singular act eventually brings about a rift between the man and woman because the woman acting under the influence of evil forces confiscates the gift of *Irakwo* (secret of life) that God asked her to give to her husband.

Ododo's choice of the name *Anataku* for the man and *Aze* for the women is symbolic because the names unveil the purpose and place of the man and the woman in the process of replenishing the earth as the Christian bible puts it. The meaning of *Anataku* is the one that everybody looks unto or the source from which people derive their livelihood or survive. It could also mean shelter for all. This clearly denotes the headship place of man over every other thing on earth. Man is meant to rule the earth, provide and nurture his home and family. On the other hand, man is expected to join hands with the woman, his helpmate in achieving his purpose. This is why the saying that behind every successful man, there is a woman is perfectly true. The meaning of *Aze* is 'will they consent/allow?' It is a question asking whether the fulfilment of a thing will be

permitted. That is, will the woman permit the fulfilment of my purpose and aspirations? In other words, the woman has a significant role to play in the success or fulfilment of a life purpose. In this mythical tale, Aze ignorantly danced to the tune of the evil creatures she met on her way home to deliver the gift of Irakwo to her husband from God. The end result is that she refuses to give the Irakwo to Anataku her husband as Ohomorihí had instructed her. Instead, she began to misuse the power of Irakwo in a negative manner to the detriment of man and the world entirely.

Likewise, Eve in chapter three of the Biblical book of Genesis fell to the subtle trick of Satan, she ate the forbidding fruit and also gave to Adam and the result of their action brought pain, sorrow and death (Ododo 6). Hence the place of the woman is crucial as the woman's action knowingly or ignorantly can affect man and the society at the large. This is why the Ebirá respect the role of woman in the home and the society. The people believe that the blessings or a curse that proceeds from the woman can affect a person, especially one that is connected to them by blood. Ododo affirms the importance of women in Ebirá culture that though the secrecy of *Ekú* is an all men affair but there are some special women known as *Onoku* serves as rear guards for the performing masquerades (85).

In the opening of the sequence one of *Vanishing Vapour*, Ododo describes an impressive representation of the heavenly abode and worship of the almighty Ohomorihí by the celestial beings: "A pitch-dark night with ominous cloud occasionally pierced with lightning and rumbles of thunder. An omnipresent power of Ohomorihí, God, is suggested through sound, movements and lightning. Celestial beings dance in spiritual splendour, suggesting order, hierarchy and serenity" (3). Ododo's choice of symbolic application of technical complements composed of ominous cloud, lightning and rumbles of thunder perfectly captures the etymology of the name Ohomorihí which is derived from *Ohi omorihí* meaning the almighty maker of rain. Ibrahim echoes the usual chant used to reverence him before the beginning of any given performance:

Ohi omorihí, ihineba oricha bedu bedu. Adai ebeba anatuaboza vehe dovasira, ikoko kou kou, ovaraka dosi, ovaraka hiduma, ogodogodo onuwoza emeturesu ani, Oganagana onuwoza emakara. Okuoza ohuru, okuoza atito, oduajini si uhwo tenyi. (51)

Translation: Mighty maker of rain, the owner of heavens, Our father above who sent every human to the world, the all-powerful, the omnipotent creator of all things, the limitless God that provide thunder

and lightning when he stirs, the one that is so far away that no hands can touch, so wide that no hands can surround. The one who decorates one with powder and soils one with ashes, the destroyer of today and maker of tomorrow, the omnipresent, all-seeing.

It is after reverencing God almighty that other created elements and forces of the universe such as Ete (earth), Ori (spirits) Ohiku (ancestors) and Onyene (female gender) are also mentioned to prepare a glitch free performance. In essence, though God almighty created man and holds the future, the fulfilment of man's destiny depends on his actions as he journeys through life. This is why when a man decides to get married in Ebira culture, his people will go the extra mile to find out the history of the woman's origin to avoid bringing undesirable element into the family.

Sequence four of *Vanishing Vapour* is an enactment of a colourful display of Echeane festival with the use of costumes and props to complement the mask display, processional dancing and singing. This masquerade festival is celebrated in honour of women from which the name Echeane is derived meaning festival/celebration of women or women celebration. Ibrahim describes the significance of Echeane as a day or season set down that the earth washes its hands. He further explains that, "[T]here are two ideas here: that of washing hands after work and that of washing hands before or after meal" (56). In other words, it is simply a period for celebration after a season of hard work and bountiful yield.

Echeane is usually a very colourful and vibrant performance with women taking the lead as they wield their occupational props such as *okaha* (fabric weaving beater) singing and dancing ahead of men and masquerades holding whips of various sizes. The drummers especially the master drummer plays a central role as they dictate the pace, movement and vibrancy of the procession. During this festive occasion, a particular traditional vegetable known as *Uzi* is usually cooked in earthen pot and communally served and shared by all and sundry.

In this sequence, Ododo dramatizes the central role of men in mask performance and the permissive importance of women to allow a glitch free celebration or to create obstruction. For instance, while the men emerge with whips and *Irapa Eku* (an ashbin container in which masquerade costumes are kept), "seven women emerge led by Aze and Ochuuchu; they stand in opposition to the procession. As the masquerade tries to force them out of the way, the women strip naked and begin to transform into weird creatures; everyone, except the masquerade runs for dear life" (88). The permissive power

of women is again displayed despite the fact that mask remains men's affair. Thus, the meaning of the name *Aze* come to play as the success of the men and masqueraders is not without the permissive support of the women.

Sequence six and seven features how the evil activities of witches hinder the hunting expedition of Anataku and his men folk. The witches aim to destroy Anataku's family by inflicting pain and sorrows of various degrees on members of the family as well as on other people who stand on their way. For instance, they make Anataku to shoot and kill Ize, his daughter-in-law thinking he shot an antelope during one of his hunting expedition. The activities of the witches here is to paralyze the activity of men and subdue them of their right and headship in the society. Here, Ododo assembles a significant enactment of Ebirá hunters' performance, known as *Ahee Ube*. It is usually a ritual performance composed of libation, sacrifice, singing, dancing and display of archery and bravery.

Sequence eight is an enactment of how Anataku with the community elders headed by *Ohindase* find a lasting solution to the menace of witchcraft activities crippling their society. Thus, "the elders conclude to establish the *Ekur'rahu* masquerade cult to counteract the powers of the witches" (90). Sequence nine and ten enact the myth of *Ekur'rahu* with all its ritual complexes and paraphernalia of performance. This is known as Ekuechi festival which signifies the visitation of ancestral spirits in form of what Ododo postulates as *facekuerade*. It is a very rich all-men-affair theatrical night activity with all relevant theatrical elements of performance ranging from ritual of various degrees, to symbolic costumes, make-up, props, music and dance. Ododo attempts to capture a typical Ekuechi festival activity in starting with the sound of *Agidibo* (slit wooden drum) that signal women's retreat indoors before the ritual begins. Following the *agidibo* is the terrifying stampede of *Ekur'ahete* combing the entire community to get rid of witches and all evil fellows for a glitch free entrance of the *Ekur'rahu* ancestral spirit. The sound of *Ekur'ahete* brings fear as no man or woman must come in contact with it as he speeds through all nooks and crannies of the town. Soon after the exit of *Ekur'ahete* the voices of *Akatapa* masquerades fill the atmosphere.

Ododo sees the *Akatapa* masquerades as playing very important role in societal cleansing; "they satirize people in the commune who are known to have violated certain societal norms or moral codes, thereby providing leverage for social control. Their utterances are uncanny and prophetic. *Akatapa* jests and chant songs foretelling the arrival of the ancestors" ("*Facekuerade*" Theatre... 118). After every necessary ritual has been performed and observed by the chief diviner in the grove of *Ireba Eku* (Eku's shrine), the ancestral *Ekur'rahu* emerges



in company of various other masquerades such as *Akisobes* and *Ekuechichi* and a stream of men followers all with whips of various sizes in a procession amidst singing and dancing. Here, Sunnie Ododo dramatizes a situation whereby the witches in a bid to destabilize the essence of Eku, challenge the power of Eku by confiscating a mask. However, the Eku cult in the process over-powers the witches thereby bringing them to their knees.

The dance rounds off in sequence eleven with a victory celebration that finally brings the witches down on their knees after the battle between good and evil. This in essence is melodramatic as good overcomes evil at the end of the tussle. The Epira believe in the supremacy of good over evil. That is, no matter how long evil thrives, good will always overtake and overcome at the end. For instance, Ododo captures the victory of good over evil in this detailed description of sequence eleven. The copious quoting of Ododo's description of sequence eleven here is for emphasis:

Sequence Eleven: Everyone is gathered at the market square to celebrate the capture of the witches. Ohindasi calls for the witches, a group from the crowd goes in to bring them but returns complaining that they are nowhere to be found. A whirlwind comes up and the witches appear to dare the crowd into a combat. They raise a song to the effect that Irakwo is God-given and cannot be exterminated; stop us with Irapa, if you can. They place the Irakwo totem Centre Stage and dare any of the men to cross it. The crowd retreats in fear but Anataku boldly comes out and crosses it without any side effect. The crowd is jubilant and the men do a short victory dance. Ohindasi brings the Irapa forward and also dares the witches to cross it. Ochuuchu confidently steps out and crosses it; her colleagues are also jubilant, but as they want to commence the victory dance, Ochuuchu begins to stagger and limps until she falls down dead. The other witches recoil in fear and Ohindasi swiftly takes the Irakwo. The witches do a dance to surrender and Aze submits the mask, the crowd is happy and now moves to pounce on the witches and they transform into Enyan'ohu; all the old women in the crowd swiftly move forward to shield them from attack. Anataku tries but he is prevented. The old women perform a ritual dance of reconciliation, at the end of which Anataku's son, Adomu, regains his speech and hearing abilities. Other people with ailments are healed. There is jubilation and dancing. Three maidens dressed with Eburou (Waist beads/Jigida) carry the Enyan'ohu on their heads and dance round the arena with them. The Ohindasi gives

Anataku the Irapa to henceforth be its custodian. His friends join him in a dance of acceptance. Masquerade and Enyan`ohu ladies do a frenetic dance of mutual respect that dovetails into curtain call. Fadeout. (91-92)

The plot of Ododo's *Vanishing Vapour* is a complete picture of the ills and evil destroying our modern society, where men and women tend towards doing evil rather than good. In the same vein, the Christian bible asserts that "the heart of man is desperately wicked, who can fathom it" (Jeremiah 17:9). *Vanishing Vapour* exposes the wickedness of man's heart, oppression, greed and selfishness and the shameful end result of an unrepentant heart.

Conclusion

Sunnie Ododo as a librettist has been able to capture the totality of the essence of life among Anebira in all spheres in *Vanishing Vapour*. It is a laudable effort, as this plotted myth will ever remain a valued documentation and resource that readily unveils the past and present life style of Ebira people. The richness of Ododo's *Vanishing Vapour* does not only project the aesthetics of Ebira cultural milieu but proffer solution to the various vices plaguing the society today. Hence, *Vanishing Vapour* is a total package that permeates all areas of Ebira culture in performance. Virtually all Ebira cultural elements and theatrical performances are contained in *Vanishing Vapour* and they are targeted at teaching good moral values and ethos of righteous living. In a nutshell, *Vanishing Vapour* reveals the past and present life of Ebira people with a futuristic agenda of a blissful society for generation yet unborn.

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