

Okponsi Festival in Amaokpala Town: A Hermeneutical Approach

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Abstract

Culture arguably is the way of life of a people and therefore, man as a social being is a product of culture. Amaokpala is an agrarian community and is blessed with a rich cultural and traditional heritage, that has been transmitted through oral traditions from generation to generation. Okponsi is an annual festival and obviously the most prominent and popular festival in Amaokpala, even to this day. The apparent misinterpretation cum misrepresentation of this all-important cultural practice by some religious zealots, non-indigenes, and non-initiates, etc, motivated this research. Okponsi is a four days festival characterized by the following features-preparation, izu-ufolo, agu-mmanwu, okobolo, iya, mmanwu, mgbako-mmanwu, oso-mmanwu and inu-mmanwu. The methodology of this research is hermeneutics and analysis in order to unravel the ontological, axiological, sociological, religious and ethical implications of this festival. The findings of this research are multifaceted and thus encompass all the aforementioned implications and more. Summarily, Okponsi should be sustained as a rich cultural heritage of a unique African community, while allowing modifications where necessary in view of current realities.

Keywords: Amaokpala, Okponsi, Culture, Hermeneutics, Analysis.

Introduction

Culture is commonly referred to as the way of life of a particular people. Life itself is holistic and all encompassing because it is multi-dimensional. It follows then, that every continent, country, race or people has a culture that is, peculiar to them. My community known as 'Amaokpala' is endowed with a rich cultural heritage, which apart from being similar to other Igbo cultures is unique. A reflection of our rich cultural heritage can be seen in every facet of our life activities - political, religious and social. It is also a truism that underlying every cultural practice is a philosophy and therefore no cultural practice exists in a vacuum. The above fact also gave credence to Richard Wright's position that "there is a traditional African philosophy and there is an emerging modern African philosophy.¹ And corroborating the above view Kwame Gyekye has this to say; "For philosophy of some kind is behind the thought and action of every people.² Consequently, in the community which I belong, every cultural practice or custom has an underlying philosophy. Thus, taking my bearing from Brinsbergen and Geschiere assertion as quoted by Amechi Chizota that, "the most practical and problem oriented research cannot do without a broader interpretative or rather, analytical framework.³ I boldly seek to undertake a hermeneutical discourse and analysis of 'Okponsi' as a culture of Amaokpala people.

Okponsi' is an annual festival and obviously the most prominent and popular festival in Amaokpala. Festivals were an integral part of the culture of Amaokpala people from very early times. They provide opportunities for relaxation and merry making in a predominantly agricultural society. There were six major festivals observed by the people of Amaokpala. These festival are; Okponsi, Isiji, ihe Orie, Onwa Ise, Itita and Ogbugba Ududenka. Among all these festivals and other cultural practices, a critical mind may be prompted to ask; why the choice of topic?

The choice of 'Okponsi' as a topic of research became inevitable because at the age of seven, a male member of Amaokpala community automatically become eligible for initiation and from thence participate actively in the celebrations. Another factor is the apparent misinterpretation and misrepresentation of this all-important cultural practice by some religious zealots, non-indigenes, and uninitiated. However, this write-up does not seek to approve Okponsi", in all ramifications, but to evaluate Okponsi as an initiate and an Amaokpalarian, to evaluate African culture as an African in the light of a worldview that Ezeani Godalex termed curvilinear as he explains;

What this implies is that they see things as linked up to every other thing; in other words, there is a perpetual intermingling and interpenetration of things to themselves. Nothing, as it were, exists and exercises its being in total isolation from other things be they material or spiritual things⁴.

It is aimed at an exposition of the rich cultural values and philosophical wisdom underlying the Okponsi and thereby ably make an objective and constructive critique of its limitations while equally exploring the ontological and axiological connotations.

Geographical Location of Amaokpala

Geographically speaking, Amaokpala is located East of the River Niger. It is a community that is today situated in Orumba North Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria. Amaokpala as a town or community has been in existence, since time immemorial. There is no recorded history of its origin. Modern historians did not mention it because it is right in the heart of Igbo land. Amaokpala is not situated along a major River, which made her early contact with Europeans further difficult. It is bordered in the East by Ndiowu, in the North-east by Ndikeliowu and Omogho, in the North-West by Awgbu in the west by Nanka and in the south by Oko.

Historical Background and Origin Of 'Okponsi'

Amaokpala as a people have been in existence since time immemorial and so is Okponsi' as a cultural practice. According to Benedict Okoli-Ekemezie, "the 'Okponsi' was began by our forefathers and handed over from generation to generation, which eventually reached our present time."⁵ For him then "Okponsi' and 'Isiji' are the most prominent cultural festivals in Amaokpala and even between the two Okponsi still takes an upper rating"⁶. He is not alone however as regards the prominence of Okponsi as Menankiti Onyekwelu has this to say;

Okponsi was probably the most prominent and popular festival in Amaokpala. It drew people from far and wide and all daughters married outside the town were usually present. All in-laws were expected to attend too⁷.

Etymologically, however, the word 'Okponsi' is a later translation of 'ikponsi' which is a coinage of two Igbo words, 'Ikpo' and 'Nsi'. The former literally means, 'to pack' and the latter meaning 'impurities or evil. 'Okponsi' then means; to pack away all evil or 'impurities; it signals the beginning of the farming season and no sane member will cultivate the land without the observance of 'Okponsi'. Benedict Okoli-Ekemezie was blunt as he avers;

Okponsi means to cleanse the land from all impurities, charms, evil, obstacles and other unforeseeable circumstances that may militate against successful cultivation of the land. It is also aimed at appeasing the gods and ancestors of the land for all evil committed by members of the community that may mar a bountiful harvest.⁸

'Okponsi' then fundamentally has religion as its basis, as it is anchored on our people's belief in the existence of God and gods and also the influence of ancestors on our lives. Amaokpala people believe that God owns the universe nay the land and all that it produces and that nothing works well without the approval of the gods. It is basically a religious exercise as affirmed by Nnamdi Odomene;

For many peoples of Africa, and Nigeria in particular, religion gives taste to culture just like salt seasons soup. Religion is also a means of maintaining the cosmic order and harmony, and it is widely believed that it was handed over to man from the deities and the ancestors.⁹

Amaokpala people as Africans widely seek the approval of their gods and ancestors before venturing to cultivate the soil. This inclination is made evident in the 'Okponsi' where they offer sacrifices and pray for forgiveness of their sins, individually and collectively. It is a prayer of penance and petitions aimed at drawing favours from the gods.

The Concept of Culture

Culture, simply put, is the way of life of a people. The system of knowledge shared by a group of people. This includes, the behaviours, beliefs, language, ideas, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, and ceremonies, etc.

Thus an online source posited;

culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concept of universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.¹⁰

Culture, as a concept, is a broad term and hence the summation of the learned behaviour of a group of people that are generally considered to be the tradition of a group of people and transmitted from generation to generation. "Okponi" as a cultural practice distinguishes the members of Amaokpala community from other communities.

Hermeneutics

Etymologically, the word hermeneutic was derived from the Greek word, 'hermeneuee'- which means to express, explain, interpret, and to say. The adjectival form is "hermeneutikos" which means the art of interpretation. Historically, the noun 'hermeneia' refers to the Greek wing-footed messenger god called hermes; whose function is associated with announcing, promulgating, and interpreting the minds of the gods. In fact, in ancient mythology, hermes is used to translate what is originally beyond human understanding into a form that is humanly understandable. In its various nuances, hermeneutics suggests the process of bringing a thing or situation or text from unintelligibility to intelligibility.

Factually, the word hermeneutics is not modern, as it was already visible in Greek antiquity, in the classical works of Plato. In the Alexandrian period, it was characterised with various connotation-translation of foreign text and combination of ancient text.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, while acknowledging that hermeneutics basically signifies two areas- (1) a disciplinary area and (2) the historical movement in which this area has been developed, averred;

Philosophically, hermeneutics therefore concerns the meaning of interpretation- its basic nature, scope and validity, as well as its place within and implications for human existence; and it treats interpretation in the context of fundamental philosophical questions about being and knowing, language and history, art and aesthetic experience and practical life.¹¹

Hence, the central idea of hermeneutics is to render language understandable, whether foreign or obscure or difficult language. By means of reformulation and (or) transposition.

Analysis

The word analysis means, "a detailed examination of anything complex in order to understand its nature or to determine its essential features: A thorough study"¹². Cambridge Dictionary of philosophy defined analysis as "the process of breaking up a concept, proposition, linguistic complex, or fact into its simple or ultimate constituents"¹³

In philosophy, philosophical analysis is the branch of philosophy that deals with the clarification of existing concepts and knowledge claims. Therefore, as a method, it embraces any of the various techniques, typically used by philosophers in the analytic tradition, in order to "break down" philosophical issues. The most prominent is conceptual analysis, which is the analysis of concepts.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy averred " philosophical analysis is method of inquiry in which one seeks to assess complex systems of thought by 'analysing' them into simpler elements whose relationships are thereby brought into focus"¹⁴.

Essential Features of 'Okponsi'

'Okponsi' as a yearly festival is a four days festival that rotates within the four market days, Afor, Nkwo, Eke, and Ori. The stage is usually set on an Eke day when the different kindred/families gather together and sacrifice a goat or cock to their gods or ancestors and ask for their blessings. Following the Eke is Ori market day, which is set out as send forth for newly married women within the year (though out of practice). The Proper celebration begins on the evening of an Afor market day and ends on the next Afor evening. The hosting of the 'Okponsi' is rotational as each year a different village begins the hosting according to the four market days.

'Okponsi' apart from the preparatory stage has many basic features, which are essential to its proper observance. Worthy of mention is, Izu-ufolo, Agu-mmanwu, Okobolo, Mgbako-Mmanwu, Iya, mmanwu, Oso-mmanwu and inu-mmanwu.

Preparation: A unique preparation is usually made in each family in order to usher in the 'Okponsi' festival. Men are usually engaged in the initial consultation that sets the ball rolling and also the process of initiation of new members. Notably too, about four or five days to the beginning of 'Okponsi' women and children involve themselves in what Menankiti termed "elaborate preparations".¹⁵ In order to forestall shortages within the period of celebrations, provisions of water and firewood are made in large quantities that will last for four days the festival will hold. Since women and the uninitiated are not allowed to venture outside the house during the four-day celebrations, large quantity of fodder for the sheep or goats must be collected.

Izu-Ufolo: Series of meetings are usually held in preparation for the 'Okponsi' festival. The sons of the first son of Amaokpala, known as Umuawuka, usually invite the members of the two major kindred (Ezi-Amaokpala and Ifite-Amaokpala) to a first meeting. This first meeting is called Izu-Ufolo, which is the invitation to start the festival process. The meeting is held at Eze-isi which is the first family in Amaokpala. Awuka is the first son of Eze-isi and his descendants are known as Umuawuka. The Izu-ufolo is a very unique meeting because on the day it is fixed no elderly person reminds the others of it. Each eligible elder goes alone and talks to no one about it. Every attendant comes with a wine, which is mixed and taken together. They eat kola nut after saying prayers, drink palm wine and dispersed without actually discussing anything. It is called Izu-ufolo because nothing is discussed at the gathering. Two other meetings are held after the Izu-ufolo where the elders now discuss about the date of 'Okponsi' and other matters related to it. At the last meeting, which is the third. the eldest man in Umuawuka will announce the date of the festival. On this day also, a sacrifice is offered to the gods to appease them, so that there will be no obstacle during the farming season and thereby preparing the ground for a good harvest. A goat is usually sacrificed and offered to the gods.

Agu-Mmanu: The date of fixing of Okponsi actually ushered in the season. It is marked by the performance of Agu-Mmanwu or tiger masquerade. Agu-Mmanwu is a night masquerade that unleashed terrifying synchronized noise/sound that makes the night air stand still. It begins from about nine O'clock in the night till the early hours of the morning and holds sway in the community.

Okobolo: 'Okobolo' is a special musical band used by the community on special occasions. It begins to operate from the first full day of the festival, Nkwo. Traditionally, it moves from village to village until the final day when the festival is rounded up with an outing at the Afor market square. A combination of 'Okobolo' and flute usually turned young men and masquerades crazy especially when strong and able hands were handling 'Okobolo'. The major musical instrument in the 'Okolobo' is the Igba or drum, which is a hollow piece of wood with leather on one end. Various sizes and designs of Igba produce different sounds and pitches of music. It is the sound of Igba that determines the beauty and rhythmic flow of ' Okolobo' , while the panegyric artistry of the flutist spurred its listening pleasure. Amaokpala people are renowned in their ability to customize Okolobo music.

Iya: Iya according to Menankiti is "an artistic display of dance steps heralded by a chorus of 'e - y - e - e' by the enthusiastic and appreciative spectators".¹⁶ It is usually performed by energetic young men at every gathering (mgbako- mmanwu) after dancing. The performance of Iya is often followed by a long

distance race with the accompaniment or 'Okolobo' music and flute by the masquerades as they engage in turns to display their capabilities.

Mmanwu [Masquerade]: Menankiti in his presentation of masquerade as a major feature of the 'Okponisi' festival opines that: "Masquerades are regarded as spirit of the dead that have come to stay temporary with the living for the purpose of entertainment and or, maintenance of law and order and for settling serious matters."¹⁷ The above perception of masquerade confirms Ikenga Metuh's elucidation that masquerades "... are believed to be spirits of the dead who have come to visit the living."¹⁸ In summary, they are masked initiates who are adorned with artistic design for entertainment and other purposes during festivals like that of 'Okponisi'.

Mgbako - Mmanwu: This is a special gathering of masquerades and the initiatives. It is a rotational encounter among the villages, within the four days of the celebration. The hosting of the community by a village or a group of villages is rotated from year to year. Umudike and Amawa could host within a particular year, followed by Ajango and Umuanuma while Amaokwe and Ugwuagu equally have their turn.

The hosting is a high point in the festival and there is usually competition among the villages, as each village or group try to outshine the others in provision of food and drinks and even in dancing. A unique feature of the village hosting of 'Mgbako-mmanwu' is the circle-dancing by men and masquerades. The masquerades create spectacular and scintillating effects with their colours and artistic designs. Interestingly, new and very clean masquerades represented those who died recently while the old and tattered ones represented the spirits of those who died long ago.

Notably, preparation for the hosting of mgbako-mmanwu is usually done in advance by the host village. All adults are expected to provide a gallon of wine. 'Abacha' (dried tapioca) is equally contributed in large quantity as this festival and indeed all festivals in Amaokpala are marked by the eating of plenty of 'Abacha-ncha'. It is generally believed that 'Abacha-ncha goes well with palm wine.

Oso-Mmanwu: This is the race to escape flogging by masquerade. It is a unique feature of 'Okponisi' festival nay 'mgbako-mmanwu' as it adds fun to the annual celebrations. A masquerade, being representative of the spirits has the prerogative of flogging a man or woman unchallenged. Thus, a wise person usually runs away when confronted by a masquerade. Oso-mmanwu or being pursued by a masquerade is thus an integral part of Okponisi festival. Many youths look forward to it with relish, as this would provide them with opportunities to tell stories of how they out maneuvered or escape being flogged by a masquerade.

Inu - Mmanwu: This is the act of desecrating a masquerade. To challenge a masquerade amount to disregard for its sacred nature and may be termed inu-mmanwu'. If a charge of desecrating a masquerade is leveled against any man or woman and proved to be true, the person has committed 'inu-mmanwu'.

A weighty punishment is meted out to any person who commits 'inu-mmanwu' and therefore masquerades exercise enormous authority over mortals. Ordinarily flogging by masquerades is tolerated as fun. The person flogged often displays machocist bravery by pretending to be unperturbed by the flogging and may even request more flogging by an open invitation to the masquerade to pursue him. Spectators often boo at a masquerade as weak and lacking in performance (while maintaining a good distance), whenever it fails to catch up with a person pursued. The above scenario often angers a masquerade and it may become aggressive and flog the audience indiscriminately. A person who outruns a masquerade receives kudos from spectators.

Consequently, if a masquerade is unmasked publicly by any man or worse still by a woman, it is regarded as the most grievous form of 'Inu-mmanwu'. This is called 'Inu-Ojotolohu' implying a desecration that is so apparent that it cannot be hidden or ignored. It must be matched with appropriate

punishment. Any act of disrespect or physically challenging a masquerade is also a form of 'Inu-mmanwu'.

Ordinarily, when a case of Inu-mmanwu is established against a man, he is fined seven goats and in some cases his house may be burnt down (old practice).

If 'Inu' was committed by a woman, it is a more serious offence. Such an anomalous situation is often corrected by the performance of various rites and the imposition of fine. In extreme cases an oath would be administered on the woman to maintain a life-long secret of what she saw.

Critical Analysis

Man fundamentally speaking is a cultural being and therefore a product of culture. Philosophers have also argued over the years that culture is relative and therefore there is no too important or perfect culture and also no cultural practice is bad completely. The 'Okponsi' then is not devoid of its limitations and therefore subject to criticism. Beginning with the etymological foundation, the 'Okponsi' is seen as a cleansing process where the land is cleansed of all evil and thereby appeasing the gods and ancestors for any evil committed in the community. We notice here that the above practice presupposes the existence of God, gods, ancestors, spirits or divinities. More glaring equally is the fact that an African in his practice of religion takes so many things for granted especially when confronted by a seemingly insurmountable problem. He most often lacks the patience to investigate deeper, beyond the physical and superficial. How can it be explained to the uninitiated that God, gods or even ancestors exist? And if they actually exist what is their nature, spiritual or material? If they are spiritual as we are meant to believe; How do they concretely interact with the material human beings? Ontologically the 'Okponsi' as a religious festival raises more problems than it seems to address. It is enough to believe in the existence of God or supersensible realities, as a result of man innate proclivity but hastily building up ideas to support such a tendency traps one in the fallacy of insufficient reason. Consequently, N. Mbefo made the following observation about masquerades;

The ancestors come back in the form of masquerades, they bless the land so that it may yield abundant fruit and to see that the primordial order is observed so that peace and unity will continue to dwell in the community."¹⁹

The masquerades are supposed to be ancestors but in the actual fact they are masked human beings living alongside others in the community. Most Africans believe in life after death and therefore personal immortality, a belief which no mortal has concretely substantiated on the simple reason that no one has died and come back to tell the story. The quotation above presents the ancestors in form of masquerades as sustainers of the primordial order but experience has shown that the cosmos has already been ordered and needs not an ancestor to order or re-order it. Otherwise how can we account for the observable order in the whole universe amidst diversity despite the non-observance of 'Okponsi' in other lands?

Okponsi in practice is segregational as women are completely isolated from active participation. They remained in an enclosure and piped out only through the holes or crevices in the walls or fence to catch a glimpse of a masquerade. The menfolk, on the other hand were involved in all aspects of the 'Okponsi'. This paper is not advocating equality of roles between men and women, however, it is our submission that 'Okponsi' in practice encourages social ostracism of women. In a culture where women are seen as the weaker sex, Okponsi' is generally regarded as a men-affair and therefore women are relegated to the background. They are only expected to fetch enough water and firewood and then remain indoors and cook for the men during the festival.

Again, the, Okponsi encourages drug addiction and drunkenness as many youths especially those wearing the mask engage in drugs and sometimes get drunk in order to boost performance. It also gives room for vengeance as some masqueraders harass or even injure their perceived enemies.

Equally, the punitive measure for those who contravene the rules or sacredness of the masquerade cult (inu-mmanwu) is often extreme. This is because houses could be burnt and properties destroyed as a punitive measure to culprits.

Concluding Reflections

In spite of the efforts made so far to unravel the mystery of personal immortality, the veil demarcating the spatio-temporal world and the world that lies beyond is yet to be lifted.²⁰

The above comment is an incontestable fact because man remains in the dark as regards the realities beyond our material realm. 'Okponso' having the existence of God, spirits, deities and ancestors as its ontological foundation equally points to the concept of immortality of the soul. The two concepts God and immortality are as controversial as any philosophical topic, with philosophers having divergent views.

Suffice it to say that the above concept will continue to be a perennial issue in philosophical deliberations as well as any other practice (like Okponso) ensuing from them. Underlying the 'Okponso' is a sound African philosophy, since it is anchored on the belief in the Supreme Being. However, it needs modifications as regards certain elements in order to accommodate present day realities. The women folk should be given a sense of belonging. The youths and other participants should be discouraged from drugs and drunkenness and be advised to anchor on their God given potentials for effective performance.

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