Prosodic Import of Eha-Amufu Mask Chants

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Abstract

Among the Eha-Amufu people of Isi-uzo Local Government Area in Enugu State, the mask institution is a hallowed traditional cult which has many variants in its fold. A notable aspect, the 'mmonwu', consists of masquerades which represent the spirits of the dead that come back to the living periodically to perform various roles which largely border on ritual modes. These actuated entities operate mostly in dramatic modes of spectacle; especially the type consisting of chants and entertainment. The mask chants and songs of esoteric and ancient traditional peculiarities form a large part of the people's cultural needs. Traditional verses rendered by the masquerades contain prosodic elements which although are not exactly intelligible words of the Eha-Amufu dialect, still contain meanings that if well comprehended contribute to a holistic appreciation of the masquerade poetry performance. The important prosodic features are what this work explores; and indeed finds out the otherwise over looked kernels of crucial information in the general versification of this all important aspect of Eha-Amufu traditional performance.

Introduction

Mask performance is a theatrical action that uses the mask character or masquerade as a major technique of representation to

form a composite performance that employs various arts and sciences such as sculpture, music, dance, poetry, metaphysics and psychodynamics in the action of mask figures regarded as spirit characters (Okafor 2008p.18). These masquerades or mask characters have different names in different parts of Igbo land such as mmonwu, maa, odo, ogbodo, ekpe, eru, okonko, okunkpo, and ekpo. The mask is made of materials such as wood, net, palm fronds or cloth as the major disguise that imbues the performer with supernatural essence, which is necessary for role-change. The masked character therefore represents another reality; the supernatural that links the performance to the chthonic realm of ancestors and other spirit. A mask character is an authentic spectacle that is seen as the highest form of art in Igbo land because it incorporates all the arts of the society to produce a kind of total theatre that is more than the modern total theatre, because of its metaphysical input. Together with members of the group, the masquerade can engage in different presentations such as song, dance, or short play, or combination of all.

In addition to entertainment, the mask also concretizes the connection of humans with the spiritual world since the mask-characters represent spirits from the chthonic realm. There are mythical masks based on historical sagas, ancestral ones that represent lineage forebears, satirical ones that lampoon social miscreants, as well as those that perform police and judicial functions. Masking activities empower participants by giving them authority, influence, and skills in the artistic processes. Elsewhere, Okafor (2008p.22) argues that the experience is important in providing opportunity or power relations, reflecting power, and maintaining stability through display of an ordered world. In this paper, we shall be using Prosodic import of Eha-amufu mask chants, to explore the role of language in the communications associated with mask chants.

Prosody

Here, we shall look at what is available in prosodic import of Eha-Amufu mask chants. To effectively handle the above, this section of the paper attempts to explain prosody as a concept.

Consonants and vowels concern the description and organization of speech sound in terms of what phoneticians refer to as segmental units. These segmental units have not only quality whose phonetic nature can be described and function in the language determined but also length, pitch, and stress. Such features according to Agbedo (2015:140) which may extend beyond the limits of the sound segment and embrace much higher, units of utterance are referred to as prosodic features or supra-segmental. These features are associated in their occurrence with stretches of segmental and therefore conterminous with them.

Kulshreshtha, Singh and Sharma (2012) capture the concept of Prosodic feature thus:

> Vowels and consonants are considered as small segments of the speech, which together form a syllable and make the utterance. Specific features that superimposed on the utterance of the speech are known as supra-segmental features. Common supra-segmental features are the stress, tone, and duration in the syllable or word for a continuous speech sequence. Sometimes even harmony and nasalization are also included under this category. Supra-segmental or prosodic features are often used in the context of speech to make it more meaningful and effective. Without supra-segmental features superimposed on the segmental features, a continuous speech can also convey meaning but often loses the effectiveness of the message being conveyed.

Trask (2007) dwells on the varieties of prosodic features:

An obvious supra-segmental is intonation, since an intonation pattern by definition extends over a whole utterance or a sizable piece of an utterance…less obvious is stress, but not only is stress a property of a whole syllable but the stress level of a syllable can only be determined by comparing it with neighbouring syllables which have greater or lesser degree of stress… The American Structuralists also treated 'juncture' phenomenon as supra-segmental. Differences in juncture are the reason that 'night rate' does not sound like 'nitrate', or 'why choose' like 'white shoes', and why the consonants in the middle of pen-knife and lamp-post are the way they are. Since these items contain essentially the same sequences of segments, the juncture placement within sequences of segments.., in most of these cases, the phonetic realization of the supra-segmental actually extends over more than one segment, but the key point is that, in all of them, the description of the supra-segmental must involve reference to more than one segment.

Fernadez & Cairns (2011p.15) explore the extent of supra-segmental information by observing that it is signalled in speech with variation in duration, pitch, and amplitude (loudness). Information like this helps the hearer segment the signal into words, and can even affect lexical searches directly. In English, lexical stress serves to distinguish words from each other…; for example compare 'trusty' and 'trustee'. Not surprisingly, English speakers are attentive to stress patterns during lexical access. Supra-segmental information can be used to identify the location of word boundaries also. In languages like English or Dutch, monosyllabic words are durational and very different from polysyllabic words. For example, the (hæm) in 'ham' has longer duration than it does in 'hamster'.

Fox (2000p.25) draw a distinction between supra-segmental and prosody thus:

Although the term "supra-segmental' and 'prosodic' to a large extent coincide in their scope and reference, it is nevertheless

sometimes useful and desirable to distinguish them. To begin with, a simple dichotomy 'segmental vs. supra-segmental does not do justice to the richness of phonological structure above the segment…this structure is complex, involving a variety of different dimensions, and prosodic features cannot simply be seen as features which are superimposed on segments. More importantly, a distinction can be made between supra-segmental as a mode of description on the one hand and prosodic as a kind of feature on the other. In other words, we may use the term supra-segmental to refer to a particular formalization in which a phonological feature can be analyzed in this way, whether it is prosodic or not. The term prosodic on the other hand, can be applied to certain features of utterances regardless of how they are formalized; prosodic features can, in principle, be analyzed segmentally as well as supra-segmental analysis.

From the foregoing, Agbedo (2015p.14) infers that the term supra-segmental refers to properties of an utterance that apply to groups of segment, rather than to individual segments. For example stress is generally assigned to a syllable rather than an individual sound. The three main supra-segmental features according to Agbedo are stress, intonation, and tone. In stress, emphasis is conveyed through differences in pitch, loudness or duration that distinguishes a stress-bearing unit (often a syllable) from neighbouring units. In some languages (not English), stress is contrastive (i.e. stress alone can distinguish between two 'otherwise' identical words). An English word with initial stress is escapade. An English word with final stress is understood. In intonation, the patterned feature of rising and falling pitch over an utterance is depicted. In English rising pitch is often used to indicate a question (Jerry loves Jenny?), while falling pitch is usually characteristic of a declarative sentence (Jerry loves Jenny). Tone is the use of pitch on a sequence of sounds to convey lexical

information. In English, tone is not contrastive, but is in many languages. For example, in Mandarin Chinese, the same syllable <u>ma</u> has four different meanings, depending on which tone is used.

Length as a feature is measured physiologically or acoustically, as duration. Segmental (mostly vowels) may be relatively long or relatively short. Pitch is the acoustic result of the speed of the variation of the vocal cords. Variations in the speed of the vocal cords vibration produce sounds acoustically higher or lower. The faster the cords vibrate, the higher the pitch. Although pitch variations is found in all languages, its function differs from language to language. Languages make use of pitch variations in two broad ways. In many Indo-European languages such as English, German, French, regular sequence of different pitches characterize stretches of speech between pauses and are known as intonation. In some other languages especially African languages, pitch differences are applied to words to distinguish two or more words whose composition in terms of consonants and vowels is the same. Pitch difference used in those ways are called tones and these languages are known as tone languages. In Igbo language for instance, the application of different pitch variations to certain lexical item yields different meanings: **akwa**

ákwá 'cry'   ákwà 'cloth'   àkwá 'bed'   àkwá 'sewing, (egg)'

There are two basic types of tones in tone languages. Register tones are measured by contrasts in the absolute pitch of different syllables. Register tones may be high, mid or low. Many West African languages use contrasts of high, mid and low tones to distinguish word meaning. Contour tones are tones involving a pitch shift upwards or down-wards on a single syllable. Many languages of East and Southeast Asia use contour tones, the best known being Mandarin Chinese. Mandarin has four tones for [ma:]. Each word means something different (mother, hemp, horse, scold.).

The differences between two uses of pitch features derive from the fact that in intentional languages (like English), pitch sequences are the property of sentences and parts of sentences wherein the lexical content of a sentence does not affect the pitch sequences. In tone languages whereby the pitch levels or the rising and falling pitches are properties of the words as lexical items, the substitution of a different word in a sentence may change the pitch sequence, if the two words concerned are different in tonal composition.

Stress, another instance of prosodic feature is defined acoustically as a measure of intensity, muscular activity or air-pressure (Agbedo, 2015). Stress, notes Robins (1980p.84), "is a generic term for the relatively greater force exerted in the articulation of part of an utterance". Although stress is often associated with greater loudness and could be of component part of prominence, the other factors involved include greater prominence or sonority of speech sounds as compared with others and the prominence of a pitch level higher or lower, than neighbouring pitches. It is often the syllable part of the lexical item that carries stress although not all the syllables within the structure of the lexical items carry stress.

It is possible to distinguish languages on the basis of differences in stress placements. In French, for instance, final pre-pausal segments are somewhat stressed. In Hungarian, the place of stress is determined by word boundaries while in Polish and Swahili, for instance, stress placement is one place before the end of a word. In the case of English, stress placement varies from word to word. As an illustration, stress falls on a different place in each of the following words;

Justice /ˈdznstis/, magneto /mægˈniːtaʊ/

Kangaroo/kængaˈruː/, malapropos /mælæprɔːpaʊ/

Some pairs of identical spoken words are distinguished in English by differences in stress placements for instance, import (Noun) /impɔːt/, import (verb) /im'pɔːt/. A good number of introductory texts on phonetics, notes Agbedo, notably Ladefoged (1993), avers that the nature of stress is fairly well understood. Stressed sounds according to him, "are those on which the speaker expends more muscular energy…so that there is an additional increase in pitch."

Similarly, Davenport and Hannahs (1994), posit that stressed syllables are produced with more muscular effort, and are louder or longer than unstressed syllables. Nonetheless, the snag with this view is that in some languages, e.g. Welsh (cf Williams, 1982); Chamorro (cf. Chung, 1987) and even in some dialects of English (e.g. Birmingham, Tyneside, Welsh English) the pitch is lower on stressed syllables than in stressed syllables, and stressed syllables may be shorter and quieter than unstressed syllables.

The principal instrument of data collection was interview and observation, given the fact that the researcher significantly is a native speaker of the dialect under study. The paper tries to investigate the prosodic import of the mask chants. By so doing, tone, pitch and stress are considered.

s/n	WORDS	MEANINGS.
1	Túmùgórò	Wine
2	íbièké	Turned yam with palm oil
3	Nbagara	Native tray
4	Ubowuru	Stomach
5	Nyuryumnyu	Toilet
6	OnumOkwudoru	Ear
7	Pirhopirho	Fowl
8	Mééméé	Goat
9	Ngbamirhikichi	Night
10	Okekeregba	Sunshine
11	OkekeregbaAgbaligwe	Sun
12	AhagahaOkeregba	Heatness of the sun
13	AhagahaNgjhegere	Lamp, touch, caddle etc
14	Okakpukpu	Herbalist
15	Omadere	Farm land
16	Gburukoro	Hall
17	Kwukwujereke	Personal house
18	Okogburu	Farmer
19	Ndegiri	Weldone
20	OphiaEszi	Yam
21	Ahoolo	Woman
22	ArhiggorubuAguro	Snake
23	Igbugburu	Cola nut
24	Igjhegere	Hand
25	Ojiji	Head
26	Mumurhirhi	Eye
27	Igbegbere	Mouth
28	Balubaluojiji	Hair
29	Nzogu	Leg
30	Njinwealu	Elders
31	Awule	Young man

S/N	Ootuevu	Masquerade chants
1.	Ahokekudoronwa mu o Ahokekudoronwa mu o E nu inaeorogbagbagba E nu inaeorogbagbagba	Man, calm down Man, calm down listen very well listen very well,
2.	A yolo inawuobodoléesziobodoinaho Keimitirunjinwalu no léesziobodo o Shi mu mirhirihiInawoléEhudirihirhilé Elo lo nalu.	A woman brought To protect and shield in the land, By the elders of the community.
3.	ahokebébklaléésziobodoinaluo. Jurujule je mieorukupioAyololaba ahu oyeO dugu I nawumararhig	A man refused my instruction and rape, in my own land. I am not happy about it.
4.	I nawoduhukahukaléesziobodoinahu oKebunchikeebuleesziobodoKe bun kaziléesziobodonalu	Go and tell the offender in our community, who

		volunteered self to commit this crime in the land.
5.	Heteruinawufvurhofvurho. Heteruinawutumogoro Heteruinawuigbugburubuoji Heteruinawu Mie Mie.	Bring to in awu (odo) fowl. Bring to in awu (odo)wine Bring to in awu (odo)colanut Bring to in awu (odo) Goat.
6.	A hoke buAyokeisiobodonalujuru juleInawubhe je he nkpnkpulénwoke Alu leesziobodoinaluMiikpoahokeojijiionyeejiruiinawojuleOnye agaejurumaduulo jure O buonyeekwuruishikeonyeonyara agbaInawubu ode girhirhimikpoAyoko le esziObodo le esziobodoNhohohoho	If the man refused to comply be that make odo to visit his compound he will face death And who will ask question Which

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		Odo? A man with his jaw remove or a beheaded man. Odo will gunned out him out of the living. Hahahahaha.
7.	AhokebuAhoke le esziobodoinawu.I na-anunwa mu op.jereleAhokeobodoléesziobodonalu	A strong man indeed isOdo himself do you hear me? No man to compare him.
8.	gjhekuturu le kpunkpungjherekenaluGjhiyeruNjinwalu, AhokebuAhokejirunjiléésziobodoShiéléinawufvudokweru le kpunkpungjhereke O buru n NjinwaluInawu	If he eventually arrived to the compound by himself, the elders And meet the man who committed

		the crime in his compound and it is real.
9.	A nuguléuregjhe rue igbegbere o. Ahokehetekwe, Njinwaluléehetekwe Le nkpwunkpuhééléesziobodoLe Ayo adugukweanuyolaI la anuyiola?Yoolayoolayoolayoola.	And he still refuse to hear, let him rise for war, for odo the eldest is out for war, when the war commenced , He odo will not listen to plead. Are you hearing? Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, the paper has presented mask performances as a theatrical action that uses the mask-character or masquerade as a major technique of representation to form a composite performance that employs various arts and sciences such as sculpture, music, dance, poetry, metaphysics and psychodynamics in the action of mask figures regarded as spirits characters. The Eha-Amufu people have cultures that are replete with masquerade chants. These mask chants involve ancient and esoteric traditional peculiarities, forming a large part of the peoples cultural dynamics.

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The meaning of these chants rendered in somehow incomprehensible tone or languages have been laid bare in this paper and the important prosodic features verified. Hence, the masquerade chants deploy a pitch of fall and rising tone to deliver their songs and these help the dancer to flow rhythmically with the dancing steps of the mask chant.

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′Primary Source (Oral Interview) Ogbonna, Ikechukwu I. 52 years, Jan., 2017 on the mask chants of the Odo mask.

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