

INITIATION IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETY: AN ANALYSIS OF URHUAMI-OTU OF THE UZAIRUE PEOPLE OF EDO STATE

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Abstract

This paper gives a synopsis of the origin of Urhuami-Otu (Initiation into manhood) and its essence in Uzairue community of Edo State. It explores the aesthetics of different elements such as dance, praises chants, body ornaments and music that make the festival a unique traditional heritage. Data obtained from primary and secondary sources were deployed to carry out the study with an analytical and narrative historical method using the structuralism theory. This paper shows that Urhuami-Otu festival started as far back as 14th century as means to a regular supply of organized and cooperate labour for farm work and an initiation of men into adulthood. The aesthetics of essential element of the festival such as the make-ups, modes of dressing, praise chants etc. are still intact; showcasing the rich culture of the community of Uzairue. The structural praxis if properly explored would be relevant in harnessing the security system in the community, and to boost food production. It is concluded that the survival of the festival is predicated on the general support of the entire Uzairue community and the advantages derived from it.

Abstract: Initiation, African Society, Urhuami-Out, Uzairue people

Introduction

Urhuami-Otu (initiation into manhood) is a tradition peculiar to the people of Uzairue in the present Edo State, Nigeria. Geographically, Uzairue is located at the northern part of Edo State consisting of about nineteen villages in Etsako West Local Government of Edo State. These villages in no particular order are; Jattu, Afashio,

Afowa, Ikabigbo, Idato, ugbeno, Irekpai, Uluoke, Ayogwiri, Ayua, Iyora, Apana, Iyhamo, Elele, Ogbido, Ayoghena, Iyuku, Auchu, Imeke. The term Uzairue is coined from *anizairue no somhi amhe*, which means, “where I made fortune” and their common dialect is Afemai.

Oral tradition has it that the earliest Uzairue community existed as far back as the 14th century (Okoroafor: 2008). However, over the years it has transformed to incorporate other communities and cultural practices. The act of Urhuami-Otu (initiation into manhood) is as old as the existence of Uzairue. Historically, it is said to have started with the practice of young boys coming together in groups to work in farms. It is an act of using friends to work in their parents’ farmlands during farming season known as “Oru” in Afemai. This ascertains Ogunbiyi’s idea that man learnt to make nature work according to his needs (Ogunbiyi: 1981). Under this arrangement as many as ten (10) boys of the same age bracket could come together and work on a particular farmland over a period of time within a particular farming season. The circle would continue until each person has enjoyed the privilege. This practice is however not limited to boys. Since Afemai is an agrarian community, farming such crops as yam, cassava, beans, groundnuts etc., the male folk engage in clearing and tilling of the soil while the female folks are known for weeding. The “Oru” practice is used to describe the means of working in group on large farmlands such as clearing, heaping, weeding and harvesting. This has tremendously helped many families to acquire farmlands and cultivate large spans of farm land. This practice gives birth to so many age-groups, promotes unity and love among members of the community and increases agricultural produce (Edemode: 2008). It also serves as means of easy identification and record keeping. Children born within a space of three years are regarded and categorized as *Otu* (mates). Because all children in the community know all parents, it also fosters respect for the elderly.

Over the years and as time went by, it came to the realization that such groups could not be limited to only farming. Their duties were extended to local policing, especially at an age when theft was becoming rampant. It was easy to identify any criminal who originated from that community because everybody, whether male or female was identified with a particular age group. As civilization crept in, young men who were able to acquire education started to travel to the city in search of better living. They began to settle outside the Uzairue community. The age group practice became limited to only the people residing in the villages. It has now become a herculean task to identify all the sons and daughters of Uzairue, hence the transformation from the “Oru” practice to more modernized gathering where young men and women may not compulsorily go to farm together before identifying with each other. This has given rise to the institutionalizing of the initiation into manhood proper. The communities have realized that farming could be substituted with community development. So people in Diaspora would prefer to pay the bill to be enlisted into their age group. Gradually, members of different age-groups have started to levy themselves to carry out projects that would be beneficial to the community.

Urhuamhi-Otu, its Administration and practices in various Communities

Each community in Uzairue has its mode of initiation into manhood, but Afashio, Afowa, Eelhe, Ikabigbo, Idato and Ugbeno have similarities in the way they conduct the initiation into manhood. For clarity, Afashio would be used as a focal point for the purpose of this study. Initiation is always conducted every three (3) years. They also ensure that the initiates are mature and can fend for themselves; some may even be married with children. A community like Jattu differs in age. As long as the initiate is 17 years, he/she would be allowed to be

initiated. Ayanwhu is completely different in its way of approach. They allow children of 9 years and above to be initiated as long as the parents are able to foot the bill. Initiation into manhood to the Uzairue community is a total heritage in agreement with Fingesi's words;

The cultural heritage of our Black and African people is the focal point of our oneness and strength. This cultural heritage encompasses our world of arts, our songs, our dances, our behaviour to one another, our communal efforts and our Humanism. (Fingesi: 1977)

It is of note to explicitly state that Urhuamhi-Otu derived its name from *Urhuamhi* which is the 'act' while *Otu* is the 'group'. *Urhuamhi-Otu* therefore is initiation of a group into manhood. The initiation rite proper is usually done by the *Ejonejie* (four oldest men in the community). This is a four-man group of the four oldest men in the community and completed by *Ogie* (the community head). Early in the morning on the initiation day proper, all initiates dress in *Odabo* (a traditionally woven cloth in multi-coloured pattern) and *Ikpemha* (beads) round their waists, holding *Udu pepe* (traditional hand fan) in one hand and *Uwha Elhamhi* (Horsetail) in the other. *Udupepe* is made out of animal skin, birds' feathers, and sometimes, woven in traditional artistic manner. They all tie *Itsawhe* round their ankles to produce sound as they move. *Itsawhe* are shakers worn round ankles (see appendixes). They are made out of sea shells, seeds from fruits, or perforated metallic objects cut to sizes. It could also be bottle caps, beaten to shapes, perforated and bound together. The essence is the production of appealing and uniformed sounds produced during movement. They also serve as sound instruments.

On this day, initiates do not wear shoe or cloth. They only tie the *Odabo* and *Aru* (red cap), displaying all the *Ibie* of different patterns and designs on their body, and different sizes of *Ikpema* on the neck and

fist to match. They all meet at *Ighogho* square where they go to each of the four eldest men's house according to seniority. Each of these elders would pour libation and bless them. They will drop money, though no stipulated amount on the floor where libation is poured, then proceed to the next until they have visited the four *Ejonejie*. From there, they go to *Oghie* who gives the final blessing and pronounces a name which the *Otu* will bear. For instance, this study is particularly based on the *Idenhebbemhe* age group of Afashio. Once the name is pronounced, people chorus the name and they all dance to *Utukwe* (village square). From there, they disperse to their various houses to freshen up and dress in full uniformed cloth, after which they converge at *Utukwe* where there would be merriments. After that day, early morning of the following day, they go round the community with their *Iyatsas* beating *Akpoges*, showering praises accordingly. This is an act of appreciation to members of the community for their support. It is also pertinent to state that *Aru Urhuamhi* is only worn by men who have passed through the initiation rite. It is therefore a taboo for somebody who has not been initiated to wear *Aru Urhuamhi* (initiation cap).

Display of African Aesthetics in Urhuami Otu Festival

Aesthetic in this context is generally conceived as an arm of philosophy which deals with beauty and what is beautiful in both art and nature. The term was coined by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762), a German philosopher of the rationalistic school. It was coined from the Greek word *aesthesis* which means sense of perception (Encyclopaedia Britannica: 1981). However, this is not to suggest that before Baumgarten there had been no knowledge of aesthetics. Rightly considered, aesthetics can be said to have existed with prehistoric man because beauty, they say is in the eyes of the beholder.

Urhuami Otu festival enjoys high recognition throughout Etsako. All men from Uzairue are expected to have undergone the

initiation process. Any man who is of age that has not initiated is regarded as a nonentity, which the Igbo refer to as *efulefu*. He will not be reckoned with at any level and will never be given recognition in any gathering. Another important attribute is that, before the initiation proper, so many activities would have taken place in preparation for the festival. The first thing is to form a group of age grade which is referred to as *iwunotu*, which operates for not less than 6 years before they are recognized by the community. During this period, all men/women born in that age bracket register their names appropriately. They will continue to serve the community in their own little way. This include clearing of bushes by road sides, riversides, clearing the cemetery, sweeping and clearing surroundings of praying centrss, market centres and village squares. Anybody who wants to join the group after this period of incubation, would be taxed a certain amount. If such a person cannot afford it, then, he/she would be denied registration. Any person who is denied registration automatically loses his age group; such person may have no choice than to register with the younger group at the next available opportunity, if he/she wishes to maintain relevance in the community.

From inception, Urhuami otu festival has contributed immensely to the rich cultural display of African heritage. Being a festival, it involves dancing, praise chanting and singing, drumming and body adornment as Fingesi posits that; “This is indeed a moment when the black and African peoples must intensify their efforts to posit their true identity in the contemporary world” (9). After the community has identified with the age grade out of their community services, they then start negotiating with the traditional ruler through the elders on how and when to be initiated. Usually, initiation festivals are performed in December. Afashio in particular has a fixed date of 26th December of the year of celebration. But Jattu being a Muslim community, performs its initiation during the *Ileya* festival. Praise chanting serves as mode of

announcement for about 21days to the festival. This is called *akpoge natso*. This is a process where wives married into the compound of the initiates display a show of love; they are strictly wives of uncles or brothers, and stepmother(s). They are referred to as *Iyatsa*. The rationale behind this action is to check excesses of growing youths. They always have it at the back of their mind that *iyatsa* deserve maximum respect. It promotes mutual respect in the community. They beat the *akpoge* round the village twice a day for 21days. So any initiate that has a sour relationship with his/her *iyatsa* would not enjoy this and that may lead to nullifying his/her opportunity to initiation.

The following must be carried out to signify manliness;

- Each member shall cut seven logs of wood, one each day for seven days, within the twenty-one days prior to initiation proper.
- All members will sleep in the village square for seven days to initiation.
- They must work on the community's chief farm from the beginning of the farming season to the end of the season in the particular year of initiation.

Traditionally, our forefathers had set values that guided their ways of living which is tailored towards good morals. The Uzairue community upholding these good morals have, institutionalized rules and regulations guiding every member of any age-group thus;

- The group must meet together for not less than two years
- There must always be mutual love and understanding among members and families alike.
- Members of the same age group must not at any point in time make love to, or marry the same girl.
- No member of the same age group must poison, quarrel with, or fight another; and same goes for wives of members
- No member, whether married or not, must have any affair with a woman within twenty-one days before initiation

All the above rules will be read clearly to them at the Chief's compound after which their umbrella name will be pronounced. They would then proceed to the village square in dance, tying what is called *odabo* and beads called *ikpema ogie*, with their bodies displaying the local tattoos of *ibie*, holding *Udupepe* and Horsetail with their red caps to match. It is of note to state that no Uzairue man wears that red cap if he has not performed the initiation rite. While going to the village square, they form a single straight line with one of the senior *iyatsa* ahead spraying white chalk known as *erue* on the ground. This signifies peace. *Erue* is white chalk that is very important in Uzairue. It is used as purifier and neutralizer.

It is an abomination to violate any of these set down rules. No age group member is allowed to call his mate by name; they are referred to as *Ogbe*, which means 'mate'. When violated, a heavy fine is placed on the offender. Wives and children of each member of the same age group must respect all members of their husbands' and fathers' age group. Wives married to men of the same age group must not quarrel or have any grievances against each other. In a case where there is a hot argument, both women must fold their hands to the back, making sure they do not point at each other, because if they point a finger at each other, that would be regarded as fighting. This is also applicable to *Ogbes*.

Another relevant point is that no *Ogbe* can commit fornication or adultery with the wife/husband of an *Ogbe* or biological blood. This is so because they are regarded as blood relation. If this act is committed secretly, children of the culprit will be affected by dying one after the other until an open confession is made because it is a great abomination. When such confession is made, some sacrifices would be performed to appease the land and the culprits would be paraded round the village with baby tortoise tied round their waists.

Africa is a unique continent due to its diversity in culture and traditional values. These vary from community to community. Even within the same community, the richness is domiciled in individual ethnic groups. These cultural/traditional values cannot be swept aside as they are laid down practices from generation to generation. Body adornment physically identify every member undergoing the initiation rite. Three days before the initiation rite, *ibie* a local dye is used to decorate each initiate.

Ibie is known as indigo and the botanical name is *indigifera*. It is among the oldest dye used for dyeing and painting. Many Asian countries such as India, China and Japan have used indigo as dye for centuries. The pod of the plant is brown in colour with thorny skin and has inner seed which is broken and ground into a smooth paste, and squeeze out the fluid. The fluid is poured into a piece of broken clay pot and a piece of charcoal is used to form it to desired paste. The paste is used to draw different types of desired designs on the body of the initiates using broom sticks to achieve competitive patterns. At this point, every initiate is not expected to wear a shirt, they will be displaying different patterns of *ibie* drawn by *iyatsa* on their bodies. The venue of the body adornment is usually the compound of the eldest member of *iyatsa*. Praise chants coupled with beating of *akpoge* are displayed with utmost sincerity. These designs may last for forty days or more. This is what is referred to as ‘tattoo’ in modern era. It is an exhibition of praise poetry and body adornment, drumming and dancing.

What has ever sustained people’s interest in African performance is the beauty on display. From far and near, the beauty of oral performance as displayed in Urhuami-Otu festival has drawn attention of researchers and tourists to the African continent. Uzairue, in Etsako of Edo State is a very good example of such attraction. The festival remains buoyant in enjoying the aesthetic value accorded any

African festival. It would be necessary to understand the position of aesthetics in traditional parlance.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the survival of Urhuami -Otu is eminent because of the role it plays in Uzairue community. It has served as means to beef up security through community policing in Uzairue and its environs. It has also maintained a bond among community members, thereby serving as a source of unification for members of community. If well supported, it would also serve as tourist attraction during festive period such as Christmas and Eld Fitri when different people would want to watch, thereby increasing the revenue base of the state and country. Another important aspect is the increase in food production. Recently, hike in food prices may be aligned to shortage of food supply. Practicing the *Oru* system could boost food supply because hectares of land would be cultivated and harvested with less stress.

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