

**RITUAL AND PERFORMANCE AESTHETICS IN THE *UKPE* FESTIVAL  
OF THE WEPPA-WANNO PEOPLE OF EDO STATE**

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to God Almighty, my help in ages past, my hope for now and years to come, and to all lovers of oral literature.

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### Abstract

The study identified the ritual and performance aesthetics in the *Ukpe* festival of Weppa-Wanno people of Edo State, It also examined the aesthetic features of the ritual performance in the festival and analysed the significance of *Ukpe* festival in the cosmology of Weppa-Wanno people. This was done with a view to establishing that *Ukpe* possessed indigenous dramatic elements.

The study employed both primary and secondary sources of data collection. The primary source included the 2012 and 2013 performances of the *Ukpe* festival. These editions were observed and the video recordings and pictures taken were used in the analysis. In addition, Interviews were conducted with eight purposively selected main custodians of the Weppa-Wanno tradition and *Ukpe* festival. These custodians included three high chiefs, two titled women and three performers who had rich knowledge of the festival. The secondary source included books, journal articles and the Internet. The data analyses were carried out using the theoretical framework of semiotics by Ropo Sekoni and Charles Sanders Peirce. The choice of semiotics was based on the premise that it formed the bedrock upon which meaning inherent in any given sign can be decoded.

The study established that the festival employed ritual and performance elements such as performance space, audience, characters, action, dance, procession, masks, songs, drumming, and elaborate costuming. All of these elements coalesced in the aesthetics of the festival. The study also revealed that the aesthetic features of *Ukpe* ritual performance served as major

determinants in the artistic evaluation of *Ukpe* as an African performative art. The study further revealed that *Ukpe* festival promoted the cosmology of the people through artistic expressions.

The study concluded that *Ukpe* encapsulates many cultural signs that provide meaning and entertainment while offering newer perspectives on the artistic vibrancy of Weppa-Wanno people and their cultural productions.

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**1.0****CHAPTER ONE****1.1****Introduction**

Africa is a continent filled with people who are highly religious. Their religions are rooted in oral traditions which constitute a remarkable part of their experiences. Africans are said to be religious because each ethnic group or kingdom has its own unique form of religious worship, tenets, beliefs and practices that emanated from their experiences of life. This is why traditional religions are strong weapons of promoting cultural practices in African communities. According to John Mbiti:

... Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the non-religious; between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the parliament. Although many African languages do not have a word for religion as such, it nevertheless accompanies the individual from long before his birth to long after his physical death.<sup>1</sup>

Mbiti's argument shows the significance of, and the role that traditional religions play in the lives of African people. The cultural lives of the people, their system of leadership, the dominant occupation, and their agricultural production system among others have religious undertones.

Ritual plays crucial roles in the lives of the people. It constitutes a significant part of their religion and culture. Every ritual performed in the traditional societies of Africa, is meant to produce desired results. Doty G William sees rituals as a "set of significant symbols relating to

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<sup>1</sup>John S Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1980), 2.

the cultural patterns of a group of people”.<sup>2</sup> In a similar manner, Mbiti avers that: “rituals are set form of carrying out a religious action or ceremony, a means of communicating something of religious significance through words, symbols and actions”<sup>3</sup> This study adopts Mbiti’s view on ritual. This means that rituals are strong religious outlets. They are sacred, communicative, performed actions, symbolic and result-driven. An African is expected to take part in or adhere to the religious beliefs and practices of his or her people. This confirms why Mbiti further argues:

Chapters of African religions are written everywhere in the life of the community, and in traditional society there are no irreligious people. To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinships and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence.<sup>4</sup>

Mbiti sheds more light on the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals as constituents of the traditional religions and the powerful influences they (religions) have on the existence of the people involved. It is expedient to note that the entire being of the African is embedded in these traditional religions which construct the identity of individuals, from birth to death. This confirms why African people cannot detach themselves from the religions, cultural practices and traditions of their people.

Africa is made up of different ethnic groups and these groups have various ways of observing rituals and festivities. This is why we have different sects of the same traditional religion with unique and artistic productions that are peculiar to them. For example, the *Ekpe* festival in Igbo land, the sacred festival of *Iri Ji Ohuru* in Igbo land, *Ekuechi* Masquerade

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<sup>2</sup> Doty G William, *Mythography: The study of myths and rituals*. (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 56.

<sup>3</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions*, 80.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

festival of the Ebirá people and the “festivals of the masses in Yoruba land” such as *Oro* Festival, *OkeBadan* festival, *Edi* festival and *Magbo* festival, among others, the *Kalabari* festival of the Ijò – speaking people of the Niger Delta and the *Igue* festival of the Benin people are some of the examples of performances that originated from the beliefs and practices of traditional religions. This underscores why Innocent Uwah argues that one of the ways through which rituals communicate, in African societies, is through traditional religion. According to him:

Traditional religion is one ritual that despite the influence of westernization, and scientific developments in Africa, still holds meaningful implications in people’s everyday life. Thus, from day break to evening, people have religious rituals with which they communicate with their God or gods, deities and ancestors. Also from weeks to seasons, months to years, there are festivals and rituals both in private and public situations which the African still celebrate in connection with the ‘living dead’ or those in the ‘spirit world’.<sup>5</sup>

This reveals the African metaphysical worldview.

It is imperative to point out that the people of Weppa-Wanno Kingdom in Edo State share a religio-social belief that there is a relationship between the living and the dead. The main aspects of the kingdom’s religious systems are rituals, myths, festivals and traditional performances of various types with unique artistic features. What is evident in the various rituals and traditional performances is an attestation of Akporobaro’s argument about the African traditional performances. As he argues:

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<sup>5</sup> Innocent Ebere-Uwah, “The representation of African traditional religion and culture in Nigeria popular films,” *Politics and Religion* Vol.v, no.1(2011): 81

Traditional performances are often highly dramatic and picturesque in form. In many occasions especially festivals and ritual celebrations highly colourful and entertaining and spectacular shows are put on for people to see. Generally, these

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