

Art and Religion as Reflected By the Ezon Traditional War-Canoe (AMUU-ARU)

Wenikado S. Ganagana

Department of Fine, Industrial and Theatre Arts, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State, Nigeria

KEYWORDS Creativity. Imagery. Semblance. Affinity. Egbesu

ABSTRACT This paper is a study of the relationship between art and religion as they are exemplified in the Ezon War Canoe, which for the people is the greatest and most sophisticated form of gunboat that exists. The paper describes the creation of the war canoe from the *Iroko* tree through the craft of a master canoe carver. It also describes the various parts of the war canoe and the activities that take place in them as well as the special people who occupy them. Whereas the bow of the canoe is occupied by a dancer who represents the priest who carries out the functions of appeasing the gods and deities and warding off spells, at the stern is the captain who steers the canoe, using spiritual and physical powers to keep it on course. The lead drum is also situated at the stern. Armed guards stay in the middle and trunk of the canoe. In the depth of it is an inner guard who has two shamanistic charm pots useful in deflecting all arsenals of the enemy shot at the canoe. Besides the description of the war canoe, the rest of the paper deals with the religious and artistic interplay in the Ezon War Canoe. It pays attention to the artistic as well as religious implication of each item in the war canoe. The paper concludes that the use of colour among the Ezon is an important index in interpreting the relationship between mortals and divinities, which though could be mysterious, yet is inspirational and exciting.

INTRODUCTION

When seen afloat in mid-stream, a war-canoe appears frightful with the dark costumed warrior occupants. Its profile, according to Ganagana (1994), is in most cases silhouetted by the corresponding angry dark clouds. These are heralded by intermittent flashes of lightening and rumble of thunder. These to the people are evidences of the positive consent of the war divinities such as Egbesu (see Fig. 3). Art and religion as often reflected in actions and traditions of the Ezons become more vivid, when the use of colours as communication resources are optimally portrayed. The art of the Ezons and their religious beliefs, with their imbued abstract interpretations could best be communicated through colours and performances are but juxtaposed. Therefore, the inherent underlying fact is that, the holistic approach to a lucid and palatable discourse about this topic can only be achieved when it is embellished with colour as its main vehicle.

THE PROFILE OF THE EZON TRADITIONAL WAR-CANOE (AMUU-ARU)

Right from time immemorial, the Ezon war-canoe (AMUU-ARU) has been recognized as a main traditional war-gunboat. This is corroborated by Anderson (2009), where it is sited that:

“traditionally, Ijo clans were united primarily by war gods who required annual festivals. In the late seventies, a festival held at Olobiri in honour of Egbesu, the War god of Kolokuma, featured masquerades and a ceremonial war canoe reminiscent of the immense craft that once plied the Nun”. This idea is further authenticated by Ganagana (2010), where it is spelt out in more details that, “since the people of Ezon are predominantly a riverine community, their main medium of transportation is by water through the rivers and the creeks. The traditional war-canoe was and is still the greatest and most sophisticated form of gun-boat that exists.”

The traditional Ezon war-canoe (AMUU-ARU) is made of wood, dug out of a long big log of either iron wood (Known as *Ewuno*) or a related variety of hard wood. The thoroughly completed heavy duty one is about twenty-five or twenty-eight feet long. This size is specifically preserved for ceremonial occasions, expeditions and for wars. Those designated for war are preserved at the waterfront of the village deity. These are classed as sacred and untouchable (Fig. 1).

As could be seen from the photograph, the bow of the canoe has provision for a dancer who is clad in a loin dark-blue cloth of knee length or below, with a bare body. He only has a scarf tied to his chest from the back. He represents the priest and also helps to detect traps already set by the enemies either far or near in the water or



Fig. 1. An actual traditional war-canoe (photo by Author) 1979

from above (Fig. 2). His main duty is to dance and appease the gods and deities. Next to him is an able bodied youth, who would always be on

the watch-out to support and wage him, when he is possessed or weighed down by spiritual arsenals from the enemies. Some distance after this,



Fig. 2. A traditional war-canoe (Artist's impression by Author-1979)

flat padded platforms are sometimes mounted with two portable canons. At the stern is the captain of the canoe who uses both spiritual and physical powers in steering the war canoe. Beside him is the gourd-guard (*Epi-le*). This guard watches over the gourd, tied to the end of the long flag that trips on the water, against any intruder who may want to challenge the crew. Right from the forebears of the Ezons, it has been the tradition that, any war-canoe passing by another village or community must not float its gourd along the other's territorial waters. The gourd like a flag of any nation is the symbol of authority of any warring community. If this gourd is allowed to float past another's territorial waters, then, it is assumed that, the performing group has authority over such a community, as the latter would be taken as second fiddle or are colonized if no challenges are made to counter the humiliation.

Such a challenger must always paddle a canoe or swim to the gourd and cut it off with a cutlass or a sword. This assailant should be ready to be shot at, cut and even beaten by few crew members of the war-canoe in action.

The lead drum or talking drum is situated next to the gourd-guard and the captain at the stern. In the middle and trunk of the canoe are many armed guards. They are seen singing and swaying to the rhythm of the music, and also brandishing their guns but alert and ready for any assault. There is also an inner guard in the depth of the canoe with two shamanistic charm pots,

which deflect all the bullets and arsenals of the enemy shot at the canoe or into it. Thus, no bullet touches any crew member. There are also two Egbesu flags-one at the bow and the other at the stern, but these are not hoisted until when the war is tough. These help to diffuse any bomb or heavy artillery shot at the canoe. Any heavy missile from the enemy can only lift the canoe unto the air on the waves, but can never be sunk or enveloped by the doldrums of waves, caused by the artillery intentionally shot at or near the canoe. This is because, in one of the pots, a concoction with a live shark (small), with the inner guard who intermittently chants that "no shark is ever enveloped by the waves of the sea" is always at work.

On either side of the cross-bar seats are two able bodied paddlers. These number up to thirty and are also armed to the teeth. They move on alert and signals from the front guard (the dancer). There is also the principle that, (Ganagana 1994), a war-canoe does not and never turns round or back. What happens is that, when there is need to retreat, the paddlers would turn round immediately and paddle back on the reverse. The art of turning round the canoe is strictly prohibited by any deity, which is supposedly guiding and guarding the canoe to the battle field. When this happens, the guard to the dancer at the bow takes his emergency propeller-paddle and does the steering until such a time the canoe can assume its normal sail³.



Fig. 3. War-canoe on sail amidst harsh weather condition (divinities consent)
(Artist's impression by Author-1979)

The number of warriors or occupants of a war-canoe is strictly determined by the deity through its chief priest. These warriors normally must pass through an ordeal or test to render them suitable and fit according to the dictates of the war-deity, such as the Egbesu. Only undefiled and selected warriors are allowed by the priest to take part in such canoes (Egbe 1994).

THE RELIGIOUS AND ARTISTIC INTERPLAY

Viewed from any perspective, the religious connotation which unequivocally stands out distinctly, tends to play down on the artistry of the entire scenario. It could be vividly seen that the whole war-canoe saga is epitomized by one form of art or another. In more gullible terms, there can be no war-canoe without all the artistry recounted in the episode. This is because even the creation analysis of the Bible clearly portrays, that visual arts transcends every other art of man including religion. This becomes most obvious in this case when the Almighty God himself (Exodus 31: 1–10) directed Moses to meet artists whom He had commissioned specifically to perform some visual artistic functions from time to time.

The Ezon traditional war-canoe in proper in-depth terms reflects the artistic legacy of the people. The well dug-out canoe and paddles are crafted from wood. The aquiline pointed shapes of the bow and stern of the canoe as well as the paddles are eloquent testimonies of marine adaptation. The yellow palm frond designs around the war-canoe which symbolizes a *death* mission, as contracted with the dark colour of the canoe, as well as the dark background colours provided by the costumes and body adornments of the warriors. The loin skirts of the warriors are in dark-blue or prussian blue. The shirts are black with a head gear or strap band that must be either black, dark-blue or prussian blue. Better still, black hats are worn by warriors, who also smear their bodies (all over, including the faces) with black charcoal ground to powder. The entire camouflage exercise is completed by the wearing of some special grasses, worn all over the body. The entire scene described here is for Ezon generally, but over the years, several other designs have occurred due to intertribal and clanish affiliations. Thus, the war-canoe described here is purely for the Kumbuo-owe, Tarakiri and

the Meintory Clans, but they all belong to the same war deity, the Egbesu. All of these deities put together are known as Agadagba.

Though there is a slight variation as portrayed by Anderson (2009), and spectacular war canoes highlight festivals of various types, recalling the Ijos' warlike past. Manned by dozens of "warriors" sporting war paint, brandishing weapons, and chanting war songs, they assault the senses by incorporating sporadic gunfire and smoking medicines, along with conspicuous arrays of raffia fronds and other "bullet-proofing" charms. This is a portrayal of the Kolokuma Clan Egbesu, which is similar to that of the others as stated above.

While this is the design for all the warriors, the priest would in addition to the above, smear some white native chalk round his left eye, on his lips, on the left wrist and some parts of his body as maybe prescribed by the war deity. In the light of the above, the costumes which have become the war paraphernalia, are been carefully designed to suit, the seascape and the tropical rainforest, enveloped by dark shades of intermittent cloud covers. A reminiscence of these shades of colours against the seascape, with the emergent cumulonimbus weather condition, gives a severer deified, congruence and triumphant assurance to these combatants, who surge ahead with optimism. Even the cannons stationed at strategic corners of the canoe are smeared all over with ground black charcoal. The flag of the deity, which is also that of the community, is also hoisted in white cloth.

This terminates with a dark gourd or small calabash dragged along the river with the aid of a tall pole at the stern or from the trunk of the canoe. It is this gourd that, a smart, elegant, vigilant and daring marksman (like a Spartan soldier) must watch over. He is always by the captain at the stern to counter any attack from any daring opposing community.

PROFILE OF A GOURD-GUARD AND A TYPICAL TRADITIONAL WARRIOR

Viewed against any perceptible horizon, the artistic and religious interplay becomes most inevitably vivid. The war paraphernalia of the traditional warrior has been so carefully designed that, it gives optimum freedom of movement and elegance. The Spartan-like and aggressive postures of these warriors reflect the agility of dar-



Fig. 4a. Flag, gourd-guard and captain
(Artist's impression by Author-1979)



Fig. 4b. Gourd guard and a typical traditional warrior
(Artist's impression by Author-2008)

ing combatant soldiers on the alert. The battle kit and placement of their war arsenals show a complete dexterity in the artistic design parlance both in colour and serenity. Religiously, the hoisting of the deity's flag, the gourd, the eagle feathers, jingle, the dark-blue and black cloths, the amulets along with the shamanistic pots in the war-canoe, are all recommended accessories of war by the clan divinities. These have been so carefully designed according to recommended and required standards, through the chief priest. All these then add to the elegance, agility and activeness of the traditional warriors. It could, therefore, be seen that art and religion can not be disassociated from each other (Fig. 4a and 4b).

CONCLUSION

Succinctly put, the importance of all the requirements as enumerated above for a traditional war-canoe is that, art and religion have a very tight undetachable allegiance like twins. One cannot do without the other. Apart from the dexterity involved in the designing of the war paraphernalia and selection of arsenals, colour symbolism has been seen to have played a major role,

in the successful launching of any attack even in the traditional setting. Colours have been used to convey religious meanings to the lay populace and the entire community at different stages of such great war expeditions.

Against the context of colour perspective and perception, the Ezon people's belief in and play on colours, and how they use them to attract nature's immediate consent, to interpret relationship between mortals and the divinities could be mysterious, yet inspirational and exciting.

REFERENCES

- Adesi AK 2008. *Agadagba Warriors and Other Plays*. Front cover design. Illorin: New Art Publishers.
- Anderson MG 2009a. Canoes and fish in Ijo art and ritual. In: Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa et al. (Eds.): *The Izon of The Niger Delta*. Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications, P. 158.
- Anderson MG 2009b. Visual arts in the Izon of the Niger Delta. In: Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa et al. (Eds.): *The Izon of The Niger Delta*. Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications, P. 132.
- Egbe I 1994. *A Cultural Background to the Plays of J. P. Clark – Bekederemo*. Ibadan: End-time Publishers.
- Ganagana WS 2010. *Ozidi Avenges*. In press. Unpublished.
- Ganagana WS 1994. Colours as a medium of communication in African Traditional Religion among the Ezons (Ijo) people: An artist's view. In: M.Y. Nabofa (Ed.): *Religious Communication, A Study in African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: Daystar Press.
- Ganagana WS 2002. Pictorial survey on twelve scenes of the Ozidi play and saga (An artist's approach). *Castalia, Ibadan Journal of Multicultural /Multi Disciplinary Studies*, 12(1): 17-30.
- Horace K 1971. *The Holy Bible*. Revised Standard Version, The Bible Societies, 1971 Exodus, 31: 1-10, P.71.