
Resurgence of Ethnic Minority Identity through Performance: The Case of the Eggon.

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ABSTRACT: *Ethnicity is a major factor in the fierce struggle for relevance and survival in Nigeria's economic and socio-political space. Ethnic minorities, from the onset, are a hugely disadvantaged category in the battle. For one, just about 60 years ago, the over 200 ethnic groups were "unrecognized" and subsumed under larger ones in the three regions of the country. In the North, the pursuit of Islamization (Jihad), the advent of Christian Missionary drive, and the British colonial policy of Indirect rule led to minority languages and cultural practices being considered "second rate" and even, "obscene". This is a study of how the Eggon, a group that was not conquered, sustained and used its performing arts to drive the mission of identity, self-actualization and group aspiration. From a qualitative framework, the study descriptively analyses the artistic milestones that sustained Eggon values and response to various challenges. The kernel of the work are the prospects offered to their struggle by the limitless possibilities of technology to performing arts. In particular, the modest first steps by the Eggon Carnival and Home video Industry is X-rayed, against the background of their current socio-political challenges. The study concludes that the new advancements in technology will not only promote and expand the production and consumption of performing arts in general, but serve as a veritable vehicle for projecting the identity and aspiration of Nigeria's ethnic minorities, which the Eggon symbolizes in this study.*

KEYWORDS: Ethnicity, Fierce Struggle, Socio-Political Challenges, Performing Art.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnicity in Nigeria's Politics - A Synopsis

By the way of establishing a fundamental premise, it is our position that the country, Nigeria, was born before and predates the Lord Lugard Constitution whose "amalgamation" is being wastefully celebrated at the time of writing this paper. Like the great intellectual literary icon and political thinker, Chinua Achebe, opined, things fell apart and the centre had never held because as populous and expansive as it is, leadership has remained the bane of the stillborn nation:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or air... The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership (Achebe, 1983:1).

Nigeria's ethnic diversity has remained an albatross to nationhood, especially so, that the country has suffered a drought of visionary leadership since independence. "This clique,

stunted by ineptitude, distracted by power games and the pursuit of material comforts, was unwilling, if not incapable, of saving our fledging new nation” (Achebe, 2012: 69).

It is this leadership deficiency that led to the civil war which brought the country close to the abyss with colossal human and economic losses. Again, Achebe posits:

...it became clear to me that the chaos enveloping all of us in Nigeria was due to the incompetence of the Nigerian ruling elite. They clearly had a poor grasp of history and found it difficult to appreciate and grapple with Nigeria’s ethnic and political complexity (Achebe, 2012: 69).

As noted by some scholars, ethnic diversity and cultural plurality are constructive and positive elements of nationhood in other climes. In the words of Osaghae and Suberu (2005:5):

A state is diverse in terms of culture, traditions, religions and ethnic groupings does not suggest that conflict is indispensable, but when mobilization around identities occur or they are politicized, only then they constitute the bases of conflict. There are evidences of diverse countries in the world (diversity in terms of ethnic, culture and religions) that have taken advantage of their diversity to better the lots of their citizenry and enjoy a reasonable level of peace and stability. Notable among these countries are Switzerland, India, Belgium, and in fact the United States.

The first republic was anchored on an ethnic/regional tripod of North, West, East, represented by Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo hegemonies. The tripod itself was placed on the suffering shoulders of many minority ethnic nationalities subsumed under the three “superior” ethnic groups:

The minorities ... were always uncomfortable with the notion that they had to fit into the tripod of the largest ethnic groups ... Many of them were from ancient nation-states in their own rights. Their leaders, however, often had to subsume their own ethnic ambitions within alliances with one of the big three groups in order to attain greater political results (Achebe, 2012: 47).

This was particularly the case with the Northern and Eastern regions. For example, the Northern region comprised the Hausa/Fulani and Kanuris in the far North and West, the Tiv, Eggon, Berom etc., in the Middle belt. Most of the tribes in the middle belt region have distinct languages, customs, cultures and traditions. Consequently, these ethnic groups could not be completely integrated in the Northern region. Even before the “unifying” influence of the colonial power was withdrawn, the divisive forces of ethnic particularism began to emerge and plague the body politic in form of inter-tribal rivalry for political power, public office and public wealth. This was especially the case with the Tiv people of the Middle belt.

It should be noted that even before colonization, the Tiv people of Benue State had resisted Muslim/Hausa hegemony (Tseayo, J; 1975). This resistance, more than any other factor, explains why Usman Dan Fodio could not conquer the Tiv when he launched his Jihad in the 19th century. The unstable relationship resulted in J.S. Tarka mobilizing the minority elements

in Northern Nigeria into the United Middle Belt Congress of Nigeria (UMBC) against the Northern People's Congress (NPC) which had intended to hegemonize Northern Nigeria (Jibo, 2001: 105).

It was the intense political and economic competition within and between the regions that led to the violent eruption of crisis. The coups and counter-groups that were unleashed onto the national scene was to paradoxically lead to the loosening of the chains of hegemonic control over the minority groups.

This loosening was first consciously deployed by the North to unveil the weakness of the so called "large and united" Biafran republic which claimed control of the oil wealth of the country. It successfully revealed the real "owners" or "hosts" of Nigerians bludgeoning oil reserves - the minority riverine Delta nationalities of the country. The further creation of state structures and emancipation of other peoples laid bare the fact that Nigeria is a conglomeration of over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups who had, however, lived together, traded, married and acculturated many years before the coming of the colonialists.

Independence and self-rule only created the fierce battle for political supremacy amongst the emergent power elite using the fuels of ethnicity and regionalism. Since then, the country has dawdled and throttled along, drifting, sighing and gasping.

Prolonged military intervention in the country's political leadership has been mixedly perceived and interpreted in terms of development. While the military has left the country underdeveloped and drained of resources, it can be argued that it was the only institution that kept the spirit of nationalism and unity aglow. Predictably, consequent upon military withdrawal and the return to civil electoral government in 1999, there were unprecedented unleash of dangerous and militarized regional and ethnic agitations and groups on the political arena.

In addition, the 2003 and 2007 general elections, with their attendant crisis (underpinned by the desire for resource control), persistent wave of political, and inter-ethnic and sectoral violence, tend to threaten the very foundations of the country. The current rage of militancy in the Niger-Delta, where Nigerians and foreigners are either being killed or kidnapped, in what began as a protest over environmental degradation has turned out to be outright desire to control state resources in that region. This has left Nigeria badly bruised both in image and material resources.

Olusegun Obasanjo bemoaned this situation thus:

Violence has reached unprecedented levels and hundreds have been killed with much more wounded or displaced from their homes on account of their ethnic or religious identification. Schooling for children has been disrupted; businesses have lost billions of Naira and property worth much more, destroyed (Daily Trust, May 19th, 2004).

The emergence and scourge of the Boko Haram in the North East has since worsened the security situation. The group has since accepted responsibility for large scale bombings, arsons, abductions, raids and killings leaving unprecedented economic and human destruction (see Wikipedia, *Boko Haram*, Retrived 20th May, 2014).

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Ethnicity

‘Ethnicity’ is a term derived from the Greek word “ethnos” which means “people” or “tribe”, and has a related English meaning of “pagan/heathen”. It refers to a race or the nation of a group of people having a common racial, cultural, religious, or linguistic characteristics. The term is also used to designate a racial or other group within a larger system.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2008-Online) defines ethnicity / ethnic group as:

A group of people differentiated from the rest of the community by racial origins or cultural background, and usually claiming or enjoying official recognition of their group identity.

In a similar vein, the Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia (2006-Online) defines ethnicity/ethnic group as “a group of human beings whose members identify with each other, usually on the basis of preferential endogamy and/or a presumed or real recognition of common ancestry.”

Ethnic identity which upholds ethnicity is usually marked by the recognition from others of a group’s distinctiveness, and the recognition of common cultural, linguistic, religious, behavioural or biological traits which are distinct from others, but clearly identifiable by others.

The German Philosopher, Max Weber, defines an ethnic group as:

Those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of custom or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for group formation. Furthermore, it does not matter whether an objective blood relationship exists (1922:389).

In this paper, we shall use ethnicity and ethnic group to mean a group of people who shares common or similar traits or behaviour necessitated by origin, ancestry, language, race or culturally influenced location within a given area, and who, as individuals and groups see themselves as distinct from others in many identifiable ways.

Ethnic Minority

An Ethnic Minority refers to a group that is less than half of the total group (Webster Dictionary). In other words, and in the Nigerian context, ethnic minorities are groups that constitute fractions of the whole when there is a predominant majority ethnic group.

When societies are demographed in such a manner, there is the natural tendency for such majority groups to suppress the rights (natural and civil) of the minority groups. This inevitably leads to agitations and rebellions by the minority groups leading to strife, conflicts and wars (Ugala, 2010:10).

Our concern is the effort at preserving Eggon culture and promoting their identity in the face of majority and domineering influences of the dominant majority culture.

Performance

The concept “performance” has been deliberately preferred over “theatre” because of its limitless connotations. While theatre denotes structured performances before an audience, performance encompasses “theatrical events” whose dialectics

...involves consideration of the ideological assumption of the time, the power structures of the society, the purpose art is intended to serve for those who patronize it, fluctuations in taste and value given to it, and the changing relation of the artist to society (White, 1995:49).

The performances that are our case studies are purpose driven and are viewed as instruments of liberation, as we shall see in the study.

THE EGGON

Nasarawa State in Nigeria is home to the Eggon who are found in at least six of the thirteen Local Government Areas in significant population. Eggon refers to both the people and the language they speak. The classification of the Eggon language itself has been a subject of academic controversy.

Initially, data collected for the Benue-Congo word-list suggested that the Eggon language falls within the Benue-Congo group. This grouping disagreed with the pioneer work of Greenberg (1963) who categorizes it among the Plateau linguistic grouping. Shimuzu (1975) was to later list it under the Benue group.

It appears the dispute surrounding the grouping of the language rages because of the existence of the dialect of the Eggon Enro which is not mutually intelligible to that spoken by the Eggon Eholo and Anzo clans. However, the latest classification of the linguistic family of Eggon is that it forms its own family along with Ake, a group in Lafia East and Lafia Local Government Areas, under the Eggonic group (Blench, 2008).

The history and origins of the Eggon appears to also share in the debate. Three major traditions of the historical account appear popular. These are the mythological explanation, traditions of migration from the Kanem Bornu Empire and dispersal from the Kwararafa Empire as a result of its collapse in 1700 A.D (Enna, 2004).

Following an analysis of the various sources, this researcher relied on cultural and linguistic authorities to reach a conclusion that there is a very high probability that the Eggon migrated from Apa in Jukunland to their present locations (Enna, 2004: 6-7).

Sibomana(1985) gives a substantially underestimated population of the Eggon to be 200,000 people in a work he published in 1985 (see Wiki/Eggon, 2013: 1). It is currently estimated that the Eggon are about a 750,000 in population. They are also found in the lower fringes of Kaduna State and the Federal Capital Territory.

EGGON WORSHIP SYSTEM AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

There are three key phenomena that shape Eggon world view. This world view influences their religious belief, their worship mode and attitude to life and death. These are the Ashum cult, spirit world (Abilibli) and witchcraft (Embaga). But we shall, first of all, examine the concept of religion in Eggon Society. This is because of the importance of religion in social relations:

For most people of the world, religion is an integral part of their existence, inseparable from their social and moral order, and it defines their relations with other human beings (Haar, Gerrieter, 2000: 4).

Religion in Eggon perception, like in most African traditional religions, is a process of continuous composite interaction between the spiritual realm and the human world.

Though the Eggon have a strong myth of creation, like the Yoruba's belief in *Oduduwa*, *Kahan* in the Eggon case, has no shrine and is not worshiped. There are no special propitiation rites for this "creator" of the Eggon people. The concept of a centrally worshiped supernatural deity in Eggon cosmology is rather non-existent.

In confronting their hostile environmental factors, however, the Eggon seem to have developed a worship system which is strongly determined by their communal will and expectations. Instead of an attitude of resignation to such environmental hostility, a gradual and systematic pool of counter-hostilities was developed for conquerable ones while propitiation and other supplication rites were developed for factors that seemed insurmountable. These have, over the years, formed the basis of Eggon dynamic religious praxis and its continuous reshaping in contemporary times.

Furthermore, there was no hiatus between the religious and the political; this is important as we earlier pointed out that religious authority was an essential tool for the acquisition of political legitimacy and the exercise of political power. This remains the basis on which the Ashum cult wielded influences over several spheres of Eggon communal life as we shall see.

THE ASHUM CULT

The Ashum cult is an all-male ancestral cult, which is symbolically the strongest heritage of the Eggon people and its essence of existence as a people with the same philosophy and cosmic aspiration. It is revered as an institution that glues the people together; it is an embodiment of all authority and political power in Eggon land.

The cult itself is as old as the Eggon. Its origin is traced to the mysteries of *kahan*, the god that is said to have dropped Eggon ancestors from the sky. Members of the cult are said to be repositories of the lore and knowledge of the god's gift of rain-making who also possessed enormous powers in diagnostic, prognostic and curative medical practices. The Ashum forms the nucleus of Eggon philosophical, political and cultural direction and reproduction. This is in addition to other laid down roles as observed by Little in his essay, "The Role of the Secret Society in Cultural Specialization" (1960: 20).

A study of the socio-political and cultural history of the Eggon society showed that the cult maintained social cohesion, communal solidarity, and the world order in pre-Colonial Eggon Society. It appears to have been the only political organization of the Eggon. It gained its political power, legitimacy and control because of its monopoly of the sacred lore of Ashum worship as well as spiritual and curative powers. As a people who were largely conditioned by beliefs in the supernatural and gained good health, harvest, fertility and long life, from the intervention of the Ashum priests' propitiation rites, rain making, and other curative rituals, the priests naturally became the political leaders.

SOCIO-POLITICAL BRIEF

Before British rule in Nigeria, the Eggon people did very little commercial agriculture. It was largely a community where the role of money as an instrument of purchase and exchange was non-existent. Though market days existed in every village, there was very little trading in such markets. These markets were places where people come to basically meet and socialize. The four thriving markets then were in Akwata, Wana, Mada Station and Alizaga (Kigbu: *ibid*).

Between 1910 and 1921 when the British colonialists invaded, conquered and established colonial rule over the Eggon, taxes of all sorts were imposed, forced labour was introduced along with other exploitative tendencies. The society was radically altered and the socio-economic system of the Eggon people was eroded.

Of course, Eggon people resisted the new concept of rule. Afterwards an anti-colonial movement which utilized the theatre emerged in Eggon land (see Wana, NAK JOS/Prof: 52). The movement attracted most of the *Moakola* who became dissatisfied with their elders and saw this as an alternative means of fighting colonialism. The movement existed in almost all Eggon villages and settlements for members were recruited as they attended "bori" night dances (for so it was initially conceived by the then colonial District Officer). This was how the *Moakola* utilized their *Ta-Erkor* training and fashioned new dances in the "Eson" anti-colonial movement. This movement lasted three years (1928 - 1931) before it was repressed and the original actors incarcerated.

Because of the extreme individualism left behind by the colonial administration, the destruction of their cultural artifact, and the total atomization of the Eggon people and society, it took the Eggon a long time to politically rediscover and redefine themselves in this neo-colonial polity which emphasized ethnicity as a premise. The theatre was revitalized to help galvanize the Eggon people for this purpose.

The first task was how to foster a sense of Eggon nationalism. This was quite crucial and yet cumbersome for the so-called legitimate authority and the stooge elite who were beneficiaries of the status quo that relegated the Eggon people to political servitude were not bothered. A small group of emerging politicians - mostly teachers who benefited from colonial education, and business men, as well as concerned civil servants decided to tackle the problem. Cultural performances were at the centre of this attempt for self-renewal (Enna, 2004: 156-158)

A result of the achievement of this cultural intervention was the emergence of the motto *Eggon Kyekkyen*, it has since then become an indelible premise in Eggon contemporary polity. All calendrical almanacs carry it as a motto. Eggon commercial drivers who were mostly Kanbari

brought-ups no longer felt ashamed of being Eggon and resorted to playing Eggon music in their vehicles as well as inscribing "*Eggon Kyekkyen*" on them. Prominent politicians who hitherto threw away their Eggon names, dusted them up and used them in times of campaign while those who did not have any quickly assumed new ones.

This was how the theatre re-awakened Eggon consciousness and cultural nationalism. The Eggon Cultural and Development Association (then at its embryonic stage) gained impetus and started vigorously to pursue projects that would strengthen the Eggon as a nation in the league of competing nations. This resulted in more Eggon cultural festivals but this time, more centralized. schools were built and politically, the Eggon people became more purposeful.

In the process of its political development, apart from the Dederre cultural revival which utilized the theatre, theatre groups and performances which were quite secular and dedicated to the cause of political organization, Eggon unity and re-historicism started to emerge. Among them are musical performances of artistes such as Bulus Anbaga, Musa Gonjo, Musa Kalala, Aliyu Dadi, Angba Masa, Chara etc.

This rather lengthy background has been necessary to demonstrate the historical role cultural production has played in the Eggon struggle.

CURRENT CHALLENGES IN EGGON SOCIETY: THE CONFLICT IN NASARAWA STATE

Due to persistent and popular agitation by the entirety of the population of the then lower Plateau, Nasarawa State was created out of the old Plateau state in 1996. The euphoria that greeted this development, an expression of the dreams of the people for a state that would ensure harmony and fast-track their migration to a modern developing state was soon to be drowned in orgies of violence.

Few months after the creation of the state, there were bloody clashes between the Igbira and Bassa in Toto Local Government Area over chiefdoms and chieftaincy. These continued for almost two years before simmering down in 1999 through concerted efforts by the State and Federal Governments.

Months later, there was another bloody and violent eruption between the Tiv and other ethnic groups in Awe, Keana and Obi Local Government Areas of the state. The climax is the assassination of the Sarkin Azara, Alh. Musa Ibrahim, who was also the then Special Adviser on Special Duties to the Governor of the state. He was beheaded; and five others were killed along with him on the spot on 12th June 2001.

In December 2009, in Nasarawa Local Government Area, there was a bloody invasion of Udenin-Gida purportedly by Fulani men who murdered over thirty persons including women and children. Attacks and counter-attacks between the Tiv and Fulani in particular have become a regular occurrence in the state, leading to mass destruction of lives and properties.

In 2007, a harmless courtesy call on the Chief of Assaikio by the campaign team of a gubernatorial candidate was the occasion for a bloody attack between the Eggon and the Alago: it claimed numerous lives and properties. The Judicial Commission of Inquiry put the number

of people killed at 667 while properties worth #2.3bn were destroyed in this single attack (Government Views, Assakio: 2012).

Nasarawa State became a notorious global conflict spot when news broke that about seventy four officers and men of the Nigerian Police as well as other security agencies were killed on their way for an operation at Alakyo in 2013. This condemnable tragedy was the climax of unreported killings, invasions, murders, arsons and intense bloody ethnic conflicts between and involving the Eggon, Alago, Tiv, Mighili, Mada, Gwandara, Bassa and Fulani. Armed ethnic militia had been formed and mercenaries were hired and deployed by the ethnic groups. Primordial ethnic alliances and fetishism were revived in the bitter inter-ethnic warfare that claimed several lives.

Between 2012 and now, these conflicts have grown in intensity, capacity and capabilities, leading to unquantifiable human and material losses. Apart from the Assaikio figures earlier quoted, precise data as to the state of destruction and damage remains speculative. This is because most of the findings of Commissions and Panels of Inquiry were not released or have not been implemented. The excerpt below from the speech of the 1st Civilian Governor of the State, on the 2001 War in Awe, Keana and Obi Local Government Areas is graphic:

..., our state has been convulsed in an orgy of inter-ethnic violence. Friends and neighbours have suddenly become enemies. Men, women and children have been slaughtered in cold blood. People were not just killed; they were butchered. Movable and immovable properties of our own brothers and sisters have been destroyed or looted. Hundreds of people have been turned into hapless and hopeless displaced people in their traditional homes. This crude and senseless violence has neither rhyme nor reason. This explosion of bottled fury and frustration threatens to set us back and retard our progress in the development of the state. [An Extract from a Broadcast on Ethnic Violence in the State. July 2 2001].

As statesmanly and grave as the above speech on the Sarkin Azara assassination is, no administration has objectively delved into the underlined core issue in a systematic and sustained way to reverse the conflict. Ten years on, the conflict has only grown deadlier and bloodier and threatens the entire fabrics of the state itself.

Many villages have been ransacked and totally obliterated leading to the internal displacement of persons. Communities have had to relocate after camping in schools and churches following the aftermath of attacks and invasions. Farm produce and cattle have been rustled, destroyed and or torched.

As a result of the foregoing, women, children and vulnerable groups have been exposed to epidemic, hunger and famine leading to deaths. It goes without saying that sexual violence was perpetrated during these conflicts. Many women and men have lost their spouses resulting to children becoming orphans. This trend has resulted into child labour and prostitution in the headquarters of affected Local Government Areas.

The above picture has further exacerbated the economic hardship of the largely agrarian Nasarawa State population as agricultural activities have been in the decline due to fear of attacks.

Furthermore, another major factor responsible for conflicts in Nasarawa State is the relationship between farmers and Fulani herdsmen. It appears that there is an increase of herdsmen migration to the area for grazing purposes due to the dearth of vegetation in the far North. There is therefore the regular trespass into farmlands and destruction of crops by cattle whose rearers are accused of being careless. This leads to regular conflicts between the herdsmen and the State's farming communities.

While the above appear to be general issues in conflicts, the specific issues in Nasarawa State and between the groups are:

1. Competition for political power
2. Access to land
3. Chiefdoms
4. Indigene/Settler status (crisis of citizenship)

More than any other thing, this conflict environment constitutes Eggon major challenge of the period. The Eggon is not the only ethnic group embroiled in it but the gruesome and condemnable event of May, 7th 2013 puts the people at the centre of the conflict:

On May 7, the nation was greeted with the tragic news of the gruesome killing of 74 security operatives by a relatively unknown group called Ombatse. The slain security operatives ... were part of a team sent to arrest the leader of the cult. (This Day Live, 19 May 2013).

Though not the major crust of this paper, the "Ombatse" saga threw the Eggon nation into negative global limelight. This is because the "cult" is traced to the Eggon nationality and, it is opined in official circles "that all the members of the Ombatse are Eggon but not all Eggon are Ombatse" (Government Views and Decision, 2014: 173).

As horrific and condemnable as the ugly accident was, it must be stated that it represented an outburst brewed by persistent injustice, lack of equity and bad governance that has plagued the political arena and administration of the state since creation, and the attendant palpable ethnic mistrust it has engendered:

There is widespread ethnic rivalry and quest for ethnic supremacy, political and related dominance in the state generally, especially among the major tribes. Consequently, all the major tribes have ethnic militias and vanguard groups with varying degrees of activities/latency (Govt. Views, 2014: 171).

The Commission correctly observes this dangerous and combustible prevailing situation, but goes further to single out the Eggon for special mention for its degree of armed activism (Govt. Views, 2014: 71). While this is not at any event a discourse of the controversial issue, as a

necessary background to this study, it is important to relate the Eggon situation to the concept of ethnic minority.

The current Governor of Nasarawa State accepts and affirms that the Eggon is one of the major ethnic groups in the state, but quickly adds:

...but they do not constitute up to 20% of the population of the state. But because of my disposition to give whoever (sic) deserves anything by either excellence or whatever, irrespective of where you came from, I decided to give about three to them (Commissioners) (This Day Live, 19, 2013: 4).

This apparent “generosity” contrasts to Eggon conception and attitude to the government, as stated in a write-up titled, “Against Eggons”;

...it will be hard to persuade dispassionate followers of affairs ...that the governor is not comparing notes with the ex-governor (Abdullahi Adamu) on the best way not just to clip the influence of the Eggon ethnic group, but also to wipe it off through a well-perfected strategy of ethnic cleansing (Frontiers News, 2014: 1).

While the debate on the Eggon population remains a political issue, another sympathizer of the governor admits that the population is about 20%. The quality and influence of the Eggon population has continued to remain undebateable. Abdullahi (a non-Eggon) asserts that:

...it is incontestable that the Eggon are more read than any ethnic composition in Nasarawa State. You have the highest number of Professors in the land. ...you are popular both in terms of population and in preponderance of educated elites spread across the country ... is itself a big challenge (Eggon News, 2013: 11)

But what has united Eggon neighbours against them and constituted their greatest challenge is not just their educational achievement but their spirit of perseverance and hard work. Also, a reliably anonymous non-Eggon source reveals that:

...the history of the Eggon we know is that of a peaceful warrior people. ...the love for peace accounted for why the Eggon man substantially dwelt on the hilltop, to keep away from disturbances. The Eggon man has never been lazy ...the people were farm warriors and exceptionally industrious. This is attested to by their preponderance around all the high profile farming zones of the state... (Eggon News)

Eggon are majorly farmers who defy the thorns and forests and make arable farmland from all kinds of dreadful vegetation. As a rule, they never lived far away from such farms. This has, over the decades, led to their settlement in bushes that have now grown into emerging villages and semi-urban areas. These promising settlements suddenly witnessed the arrival of newly created chiefdoms and installed chiefs who make demands on the Eggon farmers. This was the immediate cause of the crises in Assakio, Lafia Local Government Area (Govt. Views on Assakio, 2012).

Eggon resistance to demands for royalties and political servitude is principally responsible for Eggon status as a political minority ethnic group even though it is numerically an ethnic majority in Nasarawa State. The threat posed by Eggon educational, bureaucratic, technocratic, population spread or chorography has galvanized its neighbours to challenge its aspirations to political power.

One of the indices of this conspiracy is captured thus:

...the clouds of persecution also cover the State Civil Service where there is a supposed embargo on employment for no other reason than to block the entrance of the better educated and more qualified Eggons into the service. And for those who are already in Service, getting promotion is ...an uphill task. In the meantime, employment of other ethnic group goes on underground... (Against Eggons, 2013: 2)

The government appointed Commission captures the resultant effect, feeling and impact of the above and other perception of injustice on the Eggon most vividly in this wise:

It is a consequential finding of the Commission that the Eggon feels heavily marginalized and feels it should have been accorded more public and official space in the affairs of the State (Govt. Views, 2014: 171).

By the end of 2012, Eggon people had their villages, particularly in the Nasarawa South Senatorial Districts, violently being attacked and sacked and they were being told to relocate on the claim that they were “settlers.” This was happening as the two members representing Lafia Local Government Area in the State Legislature were Eggon while a member representing the Federal Constituency (made-up of more than half the population of the Senatorial District) is Eggon. These electoral successes of the Eggon politicians are a clear indication of the vast population of the “settlers” in the political zone.

How has the Eggon ethnic “minority” used performance to survive and keep moving in Nasarawa State? Faced with these challenges and imminent annihilation, the Eggon fell back to search for a forum for at least, self-evaluation. This was unconscious but the Festival/Carnival came to mind because, as posited by Mcgraff (1990):

...it can give voice to threatened communities, can allow them to speak, help them to survive. It can be and often linked to the wider political struggle for the right of a people ...to control its own destiny, to self-determination (Quoted by Kershaw, 1992: 11).

The Eggon Cultural and Development Association planned a cultural festival for December 2012. The permission for this event was not granted. Even before this, the traumatized Eggon Cultural groupings that had planned end of year dances (this was annual) could not hold them for security reasons.

It is in the midst of these circumstances that the group “AME WO BA EGGON” was born. The over three thousand member group was envisioned by Esla S. Madaki while away in the United Kingdom initially as a contact means but later driven by a higher mission. Disclosing their

goal, the group asserts that, “Our goal is to regenerate the Eggon race by fostering oneness and unity... we also seek ways of developing our people in every facet of life” (Carnival Programme, 2013: 4). Amidst all odds, the group organized its 1st festival in December 2012 with over two thousand people in attendance drawn from all walks of life and who also participated in the event. The 2nd festival held on the 27th and 28th December 2013 needs a closer attention.

Performances mounted included drama, different Eggon traditional dance troupes, solo musical contests, newly discovered Eggon musical talents including gospel artistes, traditional cuisines, costumes and make-up, indigenous archery and other performances, invited troupes from other ethnic groups such as Rindre, Tiv, Miighili and Mada who took part in the Carnival parade.

The overwhelming attendance on each day of the festival made the crowd to spill onto the major highway linking Nasarawa Eggon to Lafia, the State Capital. Dignitaries in the festival included traditional and political leaders while Telecommunication companies such as MTN, GLO, Etisalat and Airtel found the venue and population readily available for their businesses. The carnival was of economic importance to photographers, transporters, Video recordists, water vendors and so on; they found the festival lucrative. The programme for each day started around twelve noon and ended around seven in the evening.

It should be noted that politicians in particular found the festival an important opportunity to share and identify with the Eggon people and their travails which were captured in some of the performances, particularly by the solo musical performers.

[Slides of different Performances]



Eggon War dance



BUH Wamba Cultural Troupe Dance Procession



BUH Wamba Cultural Troupe



Eggon Elderly women dance



Eggon Masquerade Dance troupe

While the Festival boldly portrays and voices “I am Eggon” and harps on unity, the speech of the President, Eggon Cultural and Development Association (ECDA), captures the ethos:

For us to make impact, progress and to achieve anything meaningful, we must first believe in ourselves and agree to come together, and work, as well as to speak with one voice in the common interest of all (Eggon News, Feb.2014: 22).

The Video – A-when Arren

The story is plotted around a nostalgic Prince of the Eggon Kingdom, Abashi, who is sojourning in South America. During his absence, the King’s ill-health elicits a fierce jostling and plotting for the would-be-vacant stool among the palace chiefs (since Eggon paramount throne is non-hereditary). Apart from this major conflict (selfish ambition), is the portrayal of other issues that militate against Eggon unity such as envy. This is exemplified by the unhealthy relationship between Akubo and Ombuguadu. Akubo could not resist the temptation and the feeling that Ombuguadu is doing better in game hunting because of evil scheming and decides to steal his catches from the traps. These two factors lead to man-made catastrophes such as deaths, ill-health, in-fighting and spiritual warfare in the community.

Part one of the film terminates on a suspenseful note with the return of the long forgotten Prince (acted by the Producer, Iliya Abashi) to the troubled Eggon Kingdom. Expectedly, this sudden return has come to complicate the conflicts and twists in the dramaturgy and takes the anxious audience to an expectant climax in Part 2.

Some scenes from A-Wyen Aren



4 Palace Chiefs, Angbashim, Ewuga, Abashi and Akolo (Hassan Kyauta, Kuje Ogah, Amos Ibi, Bitrus Abashi) seated in consultation.



The Kingship tussle results in a fight between the wives of the two contenders Abashi and Angbashim.



Angbashim (Kuje Ogah) and his wife consulting an oracle.

The uniqueness of the video is in its use of Eggon natural setting, language, costumes, idioms and symbolisms. The Producer states his vision this way:

This is our first epic movie that can show case to the world the unique socio-cultural heritage of a given set of people. The history of the Eggon people is adorned with a unique cultural and traditional heritage ... (Eggon News, 2014: 27).

The Guest Speaker at the premier is more emphatic on the mission of promoting Eggon Identity and aspirations:

It is a fact that the Eggon nation has been endowed with very rich cultural heritage but over the years, there has been the tendency to lose all of it ... This film is the beginning to rediscover, express and promote our cultural norms ... (Eggon News, 2014:27).

Here clearly is the ideological nexus between the impetus for the “Ame Wo Ba Eggon” (I am Eggon) carnival/festival and the “A-when Arren” video. They are driven by the conscious impetus to plant Eggon Identity and aspiration in a hostile socio-political environment that threatens Eggon corporate existence. This, they are doing through the agency of Cultural production.

The theme music, carefully chosen, brings up the question of Eggon Unity as the missing link in Eggon struggles. Of course, the same artistes who performed the theme music were key players in the Carnival/ festival.

It is noteworthy that access to technology has made the production and consumption of performing arts products easier and cheaper. During the Carnival/ festival, most of the musical artistes already had their performances on CD; they sold their discs at very affordable prices. For those who found buying the discs difficult, technology has made it such that volumes of music can be stored, enjoyed and transferred to others on affordable cell phones.

Arising from this technological resourcefulness and flexibility, is the fact that performances could be more attractive (since the artiste's worth has been advertised by recorded versions), but also that the consumption and distribution is now limitless.

Furthermore, the limitless borders of audience have come with both competitions for good performances by the artistes and the globalization of the political and social issues in the lyrics. Technology has raised the contentious conflict especially those surrounding equity, justice, egalitarianism and good governance beyond the control of those who perpetrate them. Increasingly, "village" issues and local oppressive policies and actions of the government and leaders are placed on the national and international arena by little known performers/artistes via the aid of technology. For example, the Commission of Inquiry into the killing of Nigerian Security Forces in Alakio profusely listed a little known musical performer, Ahijo (Chara) which it described as "Eggon Local Musician", along with prominent National and State politicians as suspected "financiers, promoters and supporters of the outlawed Ombatse" (Govt. Views, 2014 :57).

It appears that the suspicion of the musician's support is based on the lyrics of his musical performances, and not necessarily any financial support. However, the actual danger of the lyrics is its wide circulation which was certainly facilitated by advancement in technology. If the local musician was restricted to his village and locality, the music might not have generated this high security interest and profile in the poor performer.

Incidentally, though tragic and negative, this symbiosis between technology and performance has placed the Eggon and "Ombatse" on the global view with all sorts of ramifications.

The Impact of the Performances

Performances with a more overtly 'serious' purpose – shows which engage with current moral issues, ...are hoping more obviously to alter, or confirm, their audiences' ideas and attitudes, and through that to affect their future actions (Kershaw, 1992: 2).

Though the impact of the two events are difficult to measure at this stage, it is however clear that the vision behind them was driven by the desire to establish the identity of the Eggon. This identity will serve as a uniting influence and galvanize the Eggon ethnic nationality to surmount the obstacles towards achieving their aspiration and collective well-being.

The obvious immediate impact of this cultural endeavour is that it increased and released the creative energies of the youths. As we write, there is evidence that about three other movie groups dedicated to producing video films in Eggon language, are at work.

Apart from providing employment, it is opening up new vistas in the cultural and social life of the people. This is done while the goal of education, enlightenment and mobilizing the consciousness of the people towards their collective aspiration is being given a higher push.

The other impact is that the festival in particular is opening up new and fresh bonds of relationship between the Eggon and their neighbours. As already noted, the Carnival parade/procession had in attendance/performances of non-Eggon performing groups.

The drive also brings to the fore, the positive aspects of Eggon customs and tradition. They are Eggon artifacts, cuisines, dresses, music and dances that attract lovers of culture. Moreover, there is the potential for job creation as Eggon in diaspora, patronize indigenous fashions and designs. Traditional cloth weaving is actually being encouraged.

During the festival, Nasarawa Eggon witnessed the highest flow of economic activity in history. While we may not be able to quantify the volume of trade and transaction, we can state that from the collection of drinking water polythene sachets and containers, no gathering left so much debris in the annals of the town's history.

The performances and productions are political and leadership training for the youths involved in the organization. It is a settled matter in cultural production that the art of directing/organizing a festival or performance is a rigorous schooling in discipline, emotional stability, vision, self-respect and integrity (Clurman, 1972: 14, Gbilekka, 2000: 35, Turner, 1986: 131). Thus, it is clear that with this boost in cultural creativity, there will emerge a crop of responsible and visionary youths to drive the vision of the Eggon nation.

Finally, it appears that the possibility placed by technological advancement is being employed by the performances to uplift the Eggon people psychologically, economically and politically. Eggon Cultural products, more than before, enjoy mass production, wide circulation, and can tell the Eggon story more eloquently.

CONCLUSION

This paper has analyzed the potential of performance in the effort of the Eggon nation to assert its identity and aspirations in an increasingly competitive, and hegemonic socio-political and cultural environment. Being one of the ethnic minorities that had its culture and traditions threatened by Christianity and Jihad that spread in Northern Nigeria, and the concretization of Hausa/Fulani domination through the British Colonial policy of Indirect rule, it appears to have been enmeshed in new crises.

The source of these new crises, it has been observed, appears to be the festering competition for political power, conflict over land, chiefdoms and territories by the contending ethnic groups in Nasarawa State. In this conflict environment, it appears that the Eggon, who are a numerical majority in the State, have been turned into a political minority. This is because of the perceived threat that Eggon poses if it is to add on political power to its current educational and bureaucratic standing. The threat has led to the seeming galvanization of its neighbours against it, politically.

It is observed in the study that these factors, among others, have led to violence of great magnitude attracting national and international interests and condemnation, with the Eggon coming out, worst for it. In particular, the morbid saga involving the "Ombatse" group and security agencies has left a negative national image on the identity of the Eggon. This has provided some of their neighbours an open field to deepen their image problem and bury their aspiration.

The '*Me wo-aba Eggon*' festival and the pioneer Eggon film appear to be performances that have been spontaneously re-invented from the people's consciousness, as cultural reactions to

the emerging identity challenge. The attempt is to bring back their identity, self-esteem and again, re-evaluate themselves vis-à-vis their socio-political environment.

It is the finding of this paper that these cultural performances are not only re-awakening the Eggon to their crisis of identity, but they are rebuilding their self-esteem by rejuvenating their capacities for meaningful engagement with their neighbours. Thus, serving as a better tool for conflict mediation and creating opportunities for interaction and understanding with other groups.

It is the position of this paper that more festivals (open to other ethnic groups) and more films should be encouraged. The potential is that the Eggon will understand their strengths and weaknesses through such cultural productions, interrogate their identity problem and pursue their aspiration by transforming the conflict in their environment.

Finally, State and National authorities should begin to acknowledge cultural performances as means of positive interactions that will blunt the edges of negative political relationships and interests and promote peaceful coexistence between the “minorities”, “majorities” and the “settlers”. For in today’s world, no group can be ignored. Thanks to technology, no language or dialect is rejected or detested by the mobile communication gadgets each person carries. They enable the minority to be heard on the global podium.

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