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THE ANALYSIS OF AN AFRICAN PLAY

by Simon Ottenberg*

Anthropologists have spent a good deal of time and effort on the study of African plastic art, dance, music, and folklore. A good deal of what they have written is descriptive; the detailed collection of data but without much analysis or interpretation. Other anthropologists have been concerned with the use of art materials to develop sociological explanations of social relations in a society. For example, the symbolism of the Ashanti chiefs' stools, staffs and other items have been related to their traditional social and political system (Rattray, 1927). The analysis of a new dance in a Copperbelt mining town in Zambia is linked to social change: the costumes, manner of organization, and the dance behaviour are seen as symbolizing certain realities of social life and conflict in a rapidly developing urban community (Mitchell, 1956). I have recently written a paper in which I examine a traditional Ibo play, the okumkpa, in terms of the social setting of the village where it is produced, explaining why certain events occur in terms of the social tensions that arise there (S. Ottenberg, 1971). The use of aesthetic materials to understand social systems has led to a considerable enrichment of our knowledge of how African societies operate. In this field the work of Victor Turner is outstanding (Turner, 1967, 1968, 1969).

I have no quarrel with the approach of seeing art in terms of society, or in the mere collection of descriptive and unanalyzed materials. These are standard procedures in anthropology. But I would today like to take another view, one that I am now working on. This is to explore, as an anthropologist, the question of aesthetics in Africa, rather than to use art materials to guide us to an understanding of how social systems operate. The study of African aesthetics by anthropologists has not been well developed. By aesthetics I mean the presence of artistic forms and values in a society which can be studied and analyzed in terms of a people's own

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conception of them (Thompson, 1968; Biebuyck, 1969). Behind it is the idea that the people concerned have definite ideas on beauty, humour, movement, form, creativity, colour, and other aesthetic elements, but that we, as anthropologists, art historians, or other scholars of African aesthetics, have somehow not been able to reach and understand what these African standards are. Part of this may be because Africans, as other peoples, do not readily verbalize much of their aesthetic feeling and thought when questioned. But we tend to approach African arts too much from an outside view, applying our own aesthetic standards and evaluations, and thus failing to understand African views. We have only rarely tried to comprehend the aesthetics from the African viewpoint.

I want to go back to the same okumkpa play that I have already described elsewhere in sociological terms and see if I cannot approach it in this other manner. Plays of this kind occur among the Eastern Ibo in the East Central State of Nigeria, and somewhat related forms are found elsewhere in Eastern Nigeria (Horton, 1960; Jeffreys, 1951; Messengers, 1962). At one place in the Eastern Ibo country, Afikpo, I have seen three full plays and half of a fourth, taken photographs, and interviewed the leaders of one of the plays. I have, in fact, collected a text of one such play. I base what follows on this research as an attempted probe into African aesthetics.

Afikpo is one of the numerous small confederations of villages in Ibo country (S. Ottenberg, 1968). It is composed of twenty-two villages which range in size from several hundred to over two thousand persons. The area is dense in population — there are plenty of persons about to put on elaborate plays and others to view them. An important residential unit is the village, which is the setting in which the play is presented. I call the okumkpa community theatre, for it is directly tied to village life.

A village at Afikpo is composed of a number of tightly packed compounds, each one containing a patrilineal grouping. These are located around central meeting places, which I call commons. Village leadership is not through the agency of a single chief, rather each community is ruled by
Its senior male elders acting as a group, led by some of its more vocal and influential seniors. All of the men in the community are divided into groups by age, which forms the basis of authority and communal work, as well as other activities. Each village has a secret society. This has its own initiation bush and shrine. The society is not really very secret, since all adult males are members, and even I have joined it. It is only secret from women, girls, and small boys. This secret organization is important in social control in the village, and it provides each community with a strong sense of unity and identity. Each village secret society puts on a series of public plays and dances between October and February — the harvest and ceremonial period at Aflkpo when riches in food, leisure time from farm labour and fishing, and the pleasant climate, encourage ritual performances.

The ṭkumkpa is not produced every year in every Aflkpo village. In any ceremonial season it may be given by only three or four villages. It is presented in the home village of its players, and sometimes in a neighbouring community later the same day, and that is all, although its song may be sung by men for many years afterwards. The play is organized and led by two men who arrange for and direct the rehearsals in the bush for several weeks before it is presented. The leaders are interested volunteers. They select young adults and middle-aged men who form the major element of the players' group. Younger secret society boys and men Initiates are usually required by rule of the elders to take part in order to have an impressive ceremony.

All the players are masked and costumed. Since as many as one hundred or more males may take part this makes for an impressive spectacle. The players must all be secret society members. They are considered to be spirits (ma) and not human beings. These are not considered dangerous, but rather are delightful and musing beings. The closest English translation that the Aflkpo give is 'fairies', meaning something of the sense of childhood spirits. While the players are not expected to be recognized as specific persons, just about everyone in the village who views the play knows who they are. This can be told by their manner of movement, their voice, and since
their legs and arms are visible. Women, especially, are
supposed to view them as spirits and not humans. But since
wives, girl friends, mothers, and sisters, lend cloth, waist-
beads, and other costume elements, to the players, and since
they too recognize voice, movement, and bodily features, there
are few persons in the village who do not know who the players
are. A game is being played — a fiction maintained of a
mysterious identity.

The play is given on the afternoon of a market day,
when many persons are free to view it, in the main village
commons or meeting place. This is an open area in the centre
of the community. Here are located some of the important
village shrines and the major village men's rest house where
the elders meet to discuss community matters. The importance
of the play is implied by its being held there, as well as
through its association with the secret society, and the fact
that its presentation has already been sanctioned by the village
elders.

The audience consists of just about all of the villagers
who are not taking part in the play, sometimes over one thousand
persons. They sit around the edge of the meeting place, with
the senior and important village men under a shady tree and the
women and children in other areas, often in the hot sun. The
players sit in a large circular group in the centre of the
commons, usually also in the sun. They face the elders with
the musicians at their front. This players' group, the chorus,
is the pool from which dancers and actors come out to perform;
there are no entrances to the 'stage'. The two leaders stand
in front of the chorus or move about near the audience, singing
and also explaining what is going on. The play lasts some four
or more hours.

The jkumkpa consists of a sequence of songs and short
acts interspersed with dancing and played by members of the
chorus. The acts are carried out by masked players in front
of the chorus, using voice, pantomime, and small props such
as a piece of log with four sticks in it to represent a goat,
an actual pot, or a drinking cup. The skits and songs concern
actual persons and also events that have occurred in the
community. They are satiric and ridiculing of the individuals
involved. Names of actual persons are given, their voices and
manner of walking and moving are imitated, and they are made fun of in bawdy humour. If the person who is being ridiculed is in the audience, and he is likely to be, he is expected not to be irritated but to take it as good humour. In fact, he should go up and 'dash' the leaders and other players to show that he is not angry over the matter. It is bad form for an individual to take personal revenge against the players at some later date, although persons sometimes do so. But the image is maintained that this is not a serious but a humorous play.

Let me give you some examples of the content of the songs and the acts. One type has to do with foolish persons. Here the personal morality of Afikpo over a wide range of topics is exposed. A frequent theme, acted out, sung, or both, is of a person who eats or drinks too much at a feast. He vomits or goes in his pants; in one case he falls into the latrine and has to be dragged out by his disgusted fellow feasters. Then there is the man who is foolish in marriage. He delays the marriage arrangements for ten years hoping that his future wife's parents will forget about the bride price, but in the end he has to pay it after all. This makes him angry and later he mistreats his mother-in-law by charging her for a ride in his canoe, when, as a relative, he ought to have given it to her free. Then there is the man who is giving a title feast but is too stingy to hire a palm wine tapper. He climbs up a palm tree himself, but falls down and breaks his leg. The leaders and chorus sing that he should not be so stingy.

There may be songs, naming men who wrestle and get thrown, but although they have lost they don't stop but try to continue the fight. Since the men referred to are sometimes middle-aged, men who no longer actually wrestle, the reference is not to this sport but to the fact that when they are involved in litigation and have lost they still try to make 'palaver' over it. Or there is the tale of the senior son who left home "as fat as an elephant", but returns poor years later, considered shameful as Afikpo. He tries to sell off his dead father's land to get money for himself, even as his junior brother is planning to take an important title. Another theme commonly sung and acted out concerns an ostracized man. At Afikpo ostracism is usually carried out by the
man's patrilineal grouping in his compound; it is the last step of fellow-kinsmen against a recalcitrant relative. The play relates some foolish behaviour on the part of the ostracized person. For example, he tries to do a certain ceremony but no one will cooperate with him, yet he goes ahead and does it alone. The singers mock him for this: who can do his own ritual by himself?

The two leaders have selected from a wide range of incidents that have occurred in the village, usually within the past year or so; these are matters that have not been sung about or acted out in the village before. The event is depicted as far as possible: a feast, the elders discussing something, in the case of the man and his wife and mother-in-law the discussion over the bride price and the canoe incident. If it is not feasible to make an act of it it is simply sung out. The actors here, and elsewhere in the performance, are the older players, called "ugly". They are the full adults and middle-aged men who have usually taken part in these plays before. They wear long, dark, raffia costumes, and a variety of masks, the most common kind being a type of ugly mask. This is a grotesque, dark coloured, wooden face, often with bulging cheeks, crooked eyes, a bent nose, and other facial distortions. The grotesqueness of the costume reinforces their acts; they are seen as ugly or just plain unpleasant persons. About one half of the players in the chorus come from this category. They sit back of the musicians and to their sides, and they are the principal singers in the chorus, which vocalizes in one voice.

A second theme is ridicule of the elders. Again, this is done through song and act. Here there is the theme of corruption among elders, the placing of personal interests before that of the group they represent. Cases of 'palaver' between villages are cited and elders mentioned who have taken bribes to go one way or the other in the disputes. Or the action says that the Afikpo elders keep prolonging some disputes so that they can continue to receive judges' fees. The players sing that such leaders do not help their villages but only themselves, and that they engage in foolish disputes.

One case involves a section of a community which decided that it should have its own drum. Normally there is only one
village drum, located in the main rest house in the village centre. But one ward wanted its own and there arose a dispute as to whether it should have it or not, and then a second dispute within the ward as to where it should be placed. This lead to endless argument. The players indicate that the elders should act as leaders and not engage in this sort of 'palaver' amongst themselves. They should know the reason that many of them die is because they make trouble. The names of dead leaders are recited, those who died during the dispute; the living are thus warned. For it is a common belief at Afikpo that dispute kills persons, although the mechanism of death, whether through poisoning, sorcery, or simply evil influence is vague. The players are telling their leaders to be careful and to respect the wishes of the people that they lead.

The players may also sing out, giving names, that there are village elders who are healthy yet they are shy to speak up at public meetings. They should do so.

A third form of satire has to do with the respective roles of men and women. Afikpo men believe that the sex roles should be most distinct. A woman should have a full domestic life, she may do some trading and earn money to help support her children, but she should not behave like a man. Men believe that much of the point of the village secret society is to "keep women in their place". The overly independent woman, the female who becomes interested in the secret society or in men's activities, is acting like a man, as is the woman who simply does not follow tradition. Afikpo believe that she will suffer through barrenness in a world in which children are very highly desired. This will occur through the action of spirits. Further, men should act like males and not in feminine ways; they should not be weak as women are supposed to be.

These themes arise in a variety of settings. Women are reminded in song that they should not sing the secret society verses. If they wish to know why they are not having children it is because of this. In fact, women like to do so, or to make up songs that sound almost the same as the secret society ones, but are just a bit different so that it is hard for them men to accuse them directly. Finally, however, the
men lose patience and do so. The women deny any knowledge, there is an argument, the women are forbidden to sing for a while, and then the matter is forgotten until the next time. Or, if women's pots break in the firing the players sing that the women should know that it is because they wear shoes and clothing when they fire them while formerly they went naked. They are not sticking to custom. Another song and act referred to a married women's society whose leader decided to find out who was being initiated into the secret society in the village and to demand money from the parents of each boy. The men in the village put a stop to this and the singers indicate that the women acted foolishly, for the initiation of boys is a man's activity.

Several times during the play, often following an act or song about females, the boys and young men who are the akparakpa players get up and dance about counterclockwise in a circle. They have been sitting toward the back of the chorus, and they do not usually take part as actors. They are dressed with light-coloured masks, one common type being the 'Queen' mask which has a female face with a child on top of it. The players have elaborate feminine hair arrangements on their heads and they wear plastic waist beads. Their dancing, which is in imitation of feminine styles, is much enjoyed by all.

Other skits concerning the sexes have to do with the henpecked husband. In one act a leader calls out the names of Nkpodu and his wife, Nne Odo, and two players from the 'ugly' costumed group come out to make the scene. The wife carries a pot representing her cooking stand, ekwu, for preparing meals. She places it down, calls her husband and asks him to kneel down, which he does. She says: "If there is ever a title society of which you are a member and you do not finish grating my cassava and frying it and measuring it before going to the title feast this ekwu will kill you. If you fail to tell me the exact cost of the cassava and what will be my profit, or after having done these things I go to the market and sustain a loss there, may this ekwu kill you. She waves an egg over his head and drops it into the pot. This ends the act. Afikpo men, of course, do not cook or prepare cassava for sale, which is women's work. Nor do men let women keep them from going to title society activities, which are much associated with male achievement. And men do not allow women
to perform a ritual sacrifice over them, for this is what the egg business is all about. Other like acts follow and then a song is sung in which the names of other men who are 'fireside' husbands are sung out.

In the songs here and elsewhere persons are sometimes referred to as animals, or as an aspect of nature. A man who withstood ostracism and then made his peace and was reaccepted by his compound is called "strong, like a molar tooth". The players refer to themselves as the "big birds from the bush" who have come to give a performance. The wrestlers who lose but who continue to wrestle are like the nightjar bird; they float around as this bird does in flight. Foolish leaders are referred to as a spitting cobra or a flying ant. A man who delights in making group, and who goes around encouraging and advising both sides in a dispute in a secret way that adds to the difficulty of settling the matter is referred to as a leopard. While these references are to folkloristic creatures, and the believed characteristics of certain animals, the okumkpa is really a topical play. It is not based upon myth, religion, folktales, or proverbs, but upon current events. It is like a 'calypso' in this regard.

There are other themes. Foolish and immoral behaviour is associated with illness. The last priest of the secret society died, one song goes, before his time. This reminds the present village priest to act wisely, otherwise he too may pass away. Women who act against the secret society become barren, men who dispute foolishly died, and persons who drink or eat beyond their capacity lose control of their functions. Another theme that appears again and again is that outsiders and strangers represent danger. One song refers to men who bring powerful medicines to Afikpo and then die. No one knows how to control the medicines which have caused a blight in the coconut trees as well as human deaths. Another song tells of how stranger Ibo at the Afikpo Government Station have been able to get Afikpo employed there sacked. And strangers con- niv with Afikpo leaders through bribery against the local people. All these comments suggest a suspicious view of the outside world and extol Afikpo by contrast.

The okumkpa is a morality play which stresses traditional values and upholds personal and general standards of behaviour.
and cooperation. The songs and acts on its various themes are interspersed, mixed up, as if to indicate that they all have value. And the presentation relies on several ritual role reversals.

The first of these is that the players, who are younger, act and speak as if they were the elders of the village and of Afikpo. They pass moral judgements on persons and on specific happenings as elders do. They are supported by supernatural forces through their status as 'fairies' and they are associated with the power of the secret society, as the elders are backed by various supernatural forces in everyday life. The players have ritually replaced the elders who sit quietly on the sidelines. It is the players who are in control; they dominate the situation, as the village elders normally do. Normally the players would never dare to make many of their comments, especially those concerning their seniors, in public. For this they would be severely fined. But here they are free to do so.

By imitating females the younger players are also in a role reversal. The pretence of being girls, a funny thing, reiterates the fundamental differences between the two sexes. It makes the point that men and women are unalike by nature and should remain so. The problem of the control of women is a realistic one, for modern conditions have given females a much greater degree of freedom than in the past to move about, to trade, and to engage in cash cropping and other independent economic activities (P. Ottenberg, 1959), and women are less purely domestically oriented than in the past.

Sociologically the play is concerned with important areas of tension between the sexes, and with underlying criticisms and hostilities of the younger village men toward their elders and rulers. It points the way towards the maintenance of a traditional social system. It appears that the play's implicit intention is toward the relief of these social tensions and the continuation of tradition. The okumkpa, in fact, probably has no serious influence on the Afikpo whatsoever. Men keep on being 'palaver' men and accepting bribes. Persons still become drunk and act foolishly at feasts. The 'fireside' husbands remain in the warmth of the kitchen. Women do not give up their increasingly independent ways. The
consequences of the play in these regards is nil.

But Afikpo do not usually see the purpose of the play as being to release tensions or to maintain tradition. They talk about it and regard it as a form of humour in which the creative skill is in the originality of the words of the songs and in the art of the actors. Aesthetically, then, the central theme is not control but it is humour.

People come to laugh and to be amused. It is a direct humour, with little subtlety, and lacking in obliqueness — a sort of bawdy, almost vaudeville, humour. And the acts and songs do not build up to a single or several points of tension, as in some of our Western plays. There is little development of character and role, rather persons are very briefly portrayed in the context of an event which is also quickly sketched. The play, then depends upon a series of humorous and unrelated events. If the actions are not enjoyable the audience simply leaves; there is no compulsion for them to stay.

The humour, of course, revolves around making fun of persons who are known to the community, or to Afikpo, and in observing the reactions of the persons depicted if they are in the audience. But there are several other levels of humour involved, which add to the pleasure of the play. There is the amusement in seeing adult men dress up in unusual costumes, pretending to be 'fairies' and gambolling about. The humour is also in the pretence that the players are spirits when almost everyone knows at least some of them. And the humour is in the role reversals, the young men and boys acting as females, the older players as the elders. The humour is also in the public release of gossip, for many of the events depicted, the characterizations portrayed, have been discussed and joked about by some villagers privately. But they have not usually been publicly referred to before. Gossip builds up a sense of excitement and tension; it also divides persons from persons as it unites the gossipers. The play acts to release these elements. It is a ritual cleansing of some of the gossip channels; there is humour in the very act of release.

Finally, there is humour in a return to childhood status. For young boys and adolescent males who have not yet joined the adult village secret society have their own secret societies.
While these are now declining as children go to school they have been important in the childhoods of the adult players of today. These children's societies emulate the adult ones, having their own shrines, meeting houses, and ceremonial activities. And many of them hold okumkpa plays in imitation of the ones that we have been describing, using children's masks and costume. They act out events that have occurred to them, and single, for example, that a boy, who is named, is stingy and does not share his food with other boys. Now while the children's play can be seen as an imitation of the adult one, it is also fair to view the adult okumkpa as an imitation of the children's play. The grown-up one is a sort of ritual regression to childhood amusements of yesteryear, a ceremonially sanctioned time when adult men can again act as little boys. The humour in this regression is largely unconscious, for Aflkpo do not consciously regard the adult play as a return to childhood, but as important men's business.

The charm of the play, then, lies to a certain extent in the presence and interplay of these various humorous elements.

The types of humour and the presence of a few main themes give the play unity and design. But there are other aesthetic elements to the okumkpa. There is the actual pattern of the play. I have discussed it as if it was simply a collection of acts and songs. In fact, the play is much more clearly organized. It is composed of some eight or nine sections which I call stages, and for which the Aflkpo have specific names. Persons are familiar with the pattern of these stages, and await certain of them with special interest. This organisation into sections gives the play form through time, contrast of parts, and a sense of pacing.

In the first stage the costumed players enter the arena singing and walking about as a group, with the musicians playing in front of them. This announces that the play is beginning and persons come running for seats from the compounds as they hear the music. The first social commentaries are sung in this stage. The two leaders and the group, in one play, singe about a number of persons each who had macheted another man. In the old days they would have been killed for
their actions, but today they cannot be done away with, everything goes to the courts and they are not killed. They also sang of a land dispute between two villages in which the members of one would not let those of the second pass to the farms. Now, however, it is 'civilization', and they can pass, the players sing.

This impressive movement of some hundred masked dancers into the theatrical arena, wearing some twelve or so different mask styles and two major costume forms, is followed by the second stage where the players group themselves in the centre of the arena, and either sit down or remain standing for a while. The young boys dressed as females come out and dance about the group while their leaders sing out the names of former play leaders from the village who are still alive, asking them to come out and watch the play. This is a form of praise for them. Then the leaders may sing the names of some elders whom they consider foolish or selfish, and this may be followed by one or two songs. In one play they sing of a calabash out of which a cup was made, and that persons should "put wine in the cup for me", meaning that the players expect to be 'dashed' well for their performance.

These two stages form the introduction to the play. In the next two are presented the major songs and acts, the heart of the satire. The players are now seated on the ground, with musicians in front, the ugly costumed players beyond them, the akparakpa boys in the rear, with the leaders standing in front of the group. In the third stage three or four songs are given, each of which explains some foolish action. The leaders sing and the chorus responds in a regular pattern; the songs are generally in eight lines or multiples of eight, with repeats. If the audience likes a song it may be repeated again.

Stage Four consists of songs and about five or six acts of the kinds that we have just described. Some acts have an accompanying song commentary, and there are other songs presented without acts. Toward the end of this stage the akparakpa come out and dance again, often after an act or song concerning females. Between these various actions the older players in the ugly costumes come out and dance individually to the music, begging for 'dashes' from the audience,
and male viewers go up to the players and present them with gifts to praise them for their acting or singing.

The Fifth Stage involves an individual who is ill or who has been hurt by being hit by someone. He consults diviners or other persons and eventually he is cured, usually in a humorous manner. The event is both acted and sung. In one play a man who was ostracized and then hit in a flight with his patri-kinsmen is injured. He goes to diviner after diviner but they cannot cure him. Finally he visits the Catholic Father at the Afikpo mission. This man is depicted as holding a bible in his hand which he is reading in English. There is an argument over the payment for the cure between the two — the priest seems to want a lot of money and the patient thinks he should be treated free. Finally the Father treats him and the sick person becomes well and dances about joyfully. But he cannot speak Ibo anymore. All he can do is to repeat: "My Father who art in heaven, my Father who art in heaven".

The next stage repeats one or more of the popular songs from the earlier stages. In Stage Seven which follows actors come out, one by one, and state why they think they are the most foolish person of all, again acting the roles of real persons in the village. A soup pot is on the ground in front of the players' group and the last man, and again he is acting the part of someone else, gets the pot, which is the prize of foolishness. He is the most foolish individual of all.

Stage Eight is looked forward to with considerable interest by members of the audience. Here a young boy dressed up in the female akparakpa costume, but more beautifully than most, comes out. She is accompanied by another player representing her mother who brushes her off as she dances. The leaders and the group sing a short song about the girl, whose name is given. While she is beautiful she rejects suitor after suitor. One player after another comes out representing men who wish to marry her but she refuses them. Finally she accepts someone and dances about. There is great interest in this 'girl', and in how well she dances.

As if the leaders have worn out their voices, in the final stage they speak rather than sing. One of them makes
comments about me, the other concerning women. In one play a leader stated that the elders are too greedy, that they like to 'chop' everything for themselves and do not share it. The other leader scolds the women for not firing their pots in the traditional way. They should know that this is why their pots crack and break when they make them. Women, further, should not be so proud. Before they eat they should wash their hands in the traditional manner and not use soap. This is followed by a repeat of music from the first stage, the players move off, and the audience gets up, moves about, and leaves.

We are dealing, then, with more than a collection of songs, dances, and acts, but a theatre with an organic unity, in which the skill of the play's leaders in creating scenes, acts, and in arranging them all interesting contrasts is vital to a well-appreciated performance.

The play is characterized by constant action; either there is singing, dancing, or acting, so that there is a steady onward movement, even if lacking in great moments of tension or dramatic intensity. Silences and intermissions are not used as mechanisms of contrast. The singing is arranged in variable patterns. Sometimes the two leaders verse to themselves, sometimes to the group which then responds, in a call-response pattern that is standardized. There are also two assistant leaders who sit with the group who sometimes lead the singing while the group responds. All of this is integrated with the musicians using three or four small skin drums, a wooden gong, several raffia rattles, and an iron gong. Some of the tunes are original, others are old ones reused, but the words are always new.

The play is a form of community theatre. It is primarily meaningful to those in the village where it is given, since it is based on the humour of the knowledge about who the 'fairies' really are, and on the exploration of gossip and events that are quite local, although some references to Afikpo leaders are made. The players know the audience, the audience the players, the audience one another. Contrast with our Western theatre! For this reason the okumkpa is not given more than once in the home village and again in a neighbouring village. After that much of the highly interested audience has
The sense of community is expressed in other ways. The audience shouts approval and disapproval at will and with considerable gusto, especially the males. If the 'girl' in Stage Eight does not dance well viewers rush in and stop her and break off the end of the act. At various times the leaders ask the audience whether they should go on and the audience shouts "yes". The leaders also ask members of the audience if they have understood the act or the song and the audience frequently shouts that they have not. Then the leaders go up to the various parts of the audience explaining what the action has been. The audience moves about a great deal and persons talk to one another. There is an easy, relaxed, and jovial air, with frequent interaction between the audience and the players as the play progresses and as persons come out and give 'dashes' to the players.

The theatre is one in which the ground is the stage; it is not raised, but at the same level as the audience. There are few props and no scenery except that the audience itself, the fences and tops of houses at the borders of the compounds, the trees, and the sky, form a background from the viewpoint of any observer of the play. There is some colour contrast of this backdrop with that of the costumed players. The play also moves by the contrast of the two main types of players, those in the dark ugly 'male' costumes and those in the light and feminine ones. Their colour distinctiveness, and their contrast in physical position and in action provide a duality to the performance.

It is a circular theatre, with the audience almost totally surrounding the players, but where the major focus of activity is in front of where the elders sit. Persons at the other end of the village meeting place have difficulty in hearing and seeing; this is one reason that the leaders go about explaining the action. This holds up the play in point of time and contributes to a levelling of any dramatic tension that may be produced. But the total arrangement allows the whole village to take part in the performance, either as players or as viewers. Other Afikpo and strangers may come and watch,
and they are welcomed, but they are not the main focus of the theatre. It is a community performance in which various elements of aesthetics are employed: acting, singing, dancing, 'explaining', and music. It is the particular blend of these forms which give the play its charm.

I have tried to indicate some of the aesthetic qualities of the play. Much more could be said, for example, about the individual forms of masks and how they are employed, or about the manner in which the musicians play. When I collected the data on the skumkpa, I was gathering general ethnographic information on Afikpo and there are many things that I failed to inquire about. But I would suggest that a weakness of this analysis and of my research is that I do not go enough into the Afikpo's own conception of what is beautiful and what is interesting and creative to them in this play. I have some of this but not enough. What are the meanings to the terms that they use to describe their own aesthetics and the technical terms associated with this play? What ideas are associated with these words? We cannot simply assume that the Afikpo have the same conceptions as we have with our own terms, but rather they clearly have their own standards of beauty, dancing, good acting, and satire. Why are some acts and songs funnier to them than others? I feel that I have largely failed to get at the Afikpo's own view of their own aesthetics, except indirectly, while my analysis is useful it is still too much of an outsider's interpretation. What do the members of the audience think about during the play? What associations to other events and activities, and to religious beliefs, do certain of the masks employed in the play have for them? Why can they sit for four and a half hours enjoying themselves while most of us would be weary after an hour or so of any theatrical production? To what extent do they view the play in contrast to other types of dances and plays at Afikpo. We tend to divide up the analysis into music, dancing, costume, acting and singing for these are our own categories. How would an Afikpo do this?

At any rate, I have tried to show, through the analysis of one form of play, that there is a rich creative and aesthetic life here which scholars in the African field are just beginning to understand. It is an endeavour in which Africans are playing an increasing role. And the understanding of
traditional aesthetics is not necessarily only an end in itself. It is very much tied to the development of modern African art forms, and a national theatre, for these may best develop out of some integration of traditional and modern features. A community theatre, such as at Afikpo, of course, may not be directly transferable to an urban centre, where everyone does not know one another, and where there is a shifting and changing population, but other features of the traditional art form might be utilized. The satire can easily be generalized and broadened beyond specific persons to types or stereotypes, the form of theatre suggests an application of the principle of the theatre-in-the-round, costume elements might be employed, and so on. African aesthetic life is very rich. Our specific knowledge of it is poor, but hopefully this will improve.

**FOOTNOTE**

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