

RITE OF PASSAGE AS PERFORMANCE AND A MEANS OF SOCIAL CONTROL AMONG THE ZAAR SPEAKING PEOPLE

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Abstract

Rites of passage in African societies are very significant to the collective existence of the traditional members of each community. It is the vehicle through which the younger members of a community attain maturity and fulfilment, as they move from one social or religious group to another stage. These transitions vary from one African society to the other. However, the most common rites of passage are: birth, the transition from childhood to adulthood, marriage and death. The transition discussed in this paper is initiation from childhood to adulthood; otherwise, commonly referred to as circumcision rite. Historically, in Africa, rites of passage in all communities cannot be separated from the entertainment packages and other pleasurable activities that accompany the ceremony for the collective indigenous members of the community. The religious aspect of rite, on the other hand, has been the vehicle for art, music, song, dance and other forms of aesthetic experience. This paper, therefore, seeks to buttress the cultural values of circumcision among the Zaar people, like in other African traditions, as a means through which knowledge, which is not accessible to none initiates, is transmitted and acquired by the circumcised children. The circumcised also learn to endure, learn to obey instructions from older members, learn to be tolerant, and learn to be each other's keeper as they face the challenges of defending their community. The lessons learned in turn calibrate to a means of social control where the expected behaviour and etiquettes are strictly observed so as to ensure peace, harmony and tranquillity.

Key words: Initiation, performance, entertainment, social control.

Introduction

In almost all societies in the world, the birth of a child is celebrated, because it is a blessing and sign of the continuity of the community in question. Both the immediate family and the entire community celebrate the new child, because of the increment in number and work force in the farms. As the child continues to grow out of childhood, it is the responsibility of the older members of the community to keenly nurture and observe his total being. The tutelage and indoctrination by adults in the community gradually usher the child into adulthood, physically, socially and religiously until he become an active member of the community. There are, in most traditions, different rites of passage for boys and girls to mark this great change. Different traditions have different ways of fulfilling this task of moulding the child, ranging from initiation to ordinary inculcation of the mores and values of their traditional life. This would prepare the ground for the gradual and

eventual absorption of the child into the corporate community without any secrecy. The initiation of young male children marks a significant period in the male child's life as it symbolizes his acceptance into the corporate group of his people. This renewal and transformation bestow on the boys a new sense of responsibility that demands their complete subservience to the norms and values of the community. The rite in Zaar society places the young boys in an advantageous position such that the initiated are specially treated by adults to the envious eyes of the uncircumcised, which makes the next group of young men eagerly hope and wait for their turn.

Who are the Zaar (Sayawa) People?

The Zaar (Sayawa) people are predominantly found in both Tafawa-Balewa and Bogoro Local Government Areas. The Tafawa-Balewa Local Government Area was created in 1976 together with other three hundred (300) local government areas in Nigeria as a result of the unified local government reforms. Both local governments (Tafawa-Balewa and Bogoro) are located in the South West of Bauchi town (approximately 80km away). Linguistically, the Zaar language belongs to the Chadic Language group of the West African Savannah, while oral tradition and history indicates that the Zaar people migrated from the far East to Chad Republic between the 9th and 13th century to Ngazargamu in Borno state as a result of inter-tribal wars and, the encroachment of Islam from through the Lake Chad by the Tuaregs from North Africa (Wulumba Dadi: 1991). The Zaar people live in small villages that mostly consist of people from the same ethnic descent and clans where subsistence agriculture thrives. While Sayawa (the people) and Sayanci (the language) are given names by the Hausa speaking people, the native speakers called themselves Zaar. As a result, the names of people, things and places in this essay are called by the names the native Zaar speakers refer to them so as to place the issues under discussion in their true perspectives.

The Zaar Circumcision Rite

There are two types of circumcision among the Zaar people: The one that is done at home which may involve two or more boys without any significant event accompanying the procedure called *s e e r den* (home circumcision) and the communal type of circumcision that involves the taking away of boys of a particular age group to a far distance into the bush where they are initiated into the mysteries, beliefs, values, customs and traditions of their people known as *s e e r var* (big circumcision). From the foregoing, I will consider only the latter which addresses itself more to the issue at stake. The age for the circumcision was usually between seven (7) and nine (9) years, and it was the pride of every man to see that his son goes through this experience which would symbolize the boy's bravery and courage as it also marks a significant separation and break away from his mother's manipulation and so-called cuddling. Before the day of the circumcision comes, every man will prepare his son for the event by mystifying him with deceitful and fanciful stories that were above his imagination. Some men would even tell their sons that on arrival to the bush there were beautiful girls that would be distributed to the boys and immediately they had sex with them the foreskins of their male genitals would remove on its own, and the circumcision is automatically and naturally done. Ironically, these girls were not humans but masquerades who are believed to be spirits of the dead ancestors that

usually come from their abode underground. Such stories were supposed to make the boys lively and courageous to prepare them for the initiation.

On the fateful day that the boys would be taken to the bush, most mothers would kill fowls and prepare delicious meals for their sons before they depart for the four weeks' circumcision in the bush. Some mothers would wear gloomy and bleak faces on that day, especially those that are emotionally attached to their sons, while the brave ones would endure it and consider it a normal traditional practice. On some rare occasions a woman may connive and hide her son from participating; but during that period a masquerade, *naalui*, would move round the village to ensure that no child that had reached the age of circumcision was left behind. *Naalui* would always move round the village spying where children were playing, and would immediately close on a young boy that is of that age and take him to his mates in the bush for circumcision. Every child would usually be given a male guide called *burzhya*. If there are two or more children from the same household or an extended family, they may decide to give them one *burzhya*. They will assemble all the boys in one place and conduct a proper head count before the journey to the bush. A traditional priest called *singwaari* and masquerades, *umtse*, would accompany the boys to ensure their security from the rear.

Camara Laye describes a similar rite in Guinea in *The African Child*, where as a prelude to the circumcision the male children go through an induction in the night of Konden Diara before the communal circumcision ritual. It involves isolating the initiates in bushy areas for some time where the bigger boys pretend to be lions that roar at night. It is a very challenging experience, but it helps to drive fear out of the boys as they prepare for adult responsibilities as one of the elders captures it in, "now that you are going to become men, conduct yourselves like men; drive away your fears. A man is afraid of nothing." The striking similarity with the Zaar circumcision lies in nothing less than the scenery captured described by Laye (1978:102) in:

We had reached a circular clearing, the ground completely bare. All round, grasses grew high, higher than the men's heads; it was the most secluded spot one could have wished to find. We were lined up, each of us in front of a stone. At the other end of the clearing, the men stood facing us. And we took off our clothes.

This moment of realization and test of bravery and indoctrination sums up what makes a man in every traditional African society. Similarly, among the Zaar, on reaching the venue in the bush, there is a reserved place with a thick cluster of trees that provide shades; leaves are spread on the ground to serve as their beds. All the boys are kept in one place with their eyes closed and heads facing down, and masquerades keeping watch to discipline any recalcitrant and inquisitive child. A small hole is dug close to their abode where all the boys are circumcised one after the other by a traditional specialist who is in turn closely supervised by a traditional priest, *singwaari*, and a man with a sharp axe to make sure no child is wounded in the process. In some cases, the specialist carrying out the circumcision could be struck down with the axe if any of the boys is wounded beyond imagination.

After the successful circumcision, the group are kept together in one place with the male guides, *burzhya*, providing security and instilling discipline. The male guides will usually be exchanged so as to ensure fair treatment and detach any emotional attachment between them and the circumcised boy(s). From that period different lessons are taught to the boys about what they should and what they shouldn't do. Fairy tales and tales that demonstrate manliness, bravery and endurance are told to them by the *burzhya* and other elderly men. Their bravery is tested in several ways at night. For example, a child could be sent in the night to go and fetch some leaves or firewood from a nearby place for them to make fire. Unknown to the boy, somebody has hidden in the dark to threaten him. If the boy shouts or screams he would be severely beaten, because it is an act of cowardice. Such things will continue throughout the period of their stay in the bush until they are convinced that the boys have been properly initiated and indoctrinated in their traditional culture. Also, while in the bush, any man or woman; in fact, anything that has life and passes around the camp in a suspicious way would be killed, because it is believed that people with unclean minds and spirits could appear in any form and come to the camp to cause misfortune to the young boys. The experience is captured by Mbiti (1980:122):

Initiation rites have a great educational purpose. The occasion often marks the beginning of acquiring knowledge which is otherwise not accessible to those who have not been initiated...They learn to endure hardships, they learn to live with one another, they learn to obey, they learn the secrets and mysteries of the man-woman relationship.

Therefore, traditionally, after the rite, maturity has been attained and it is a new dawn from childhood. Henceforth, their social, economic and traditional lives must be in consonance with what their tradition accepts and dictates. All actions taken by the initiated boys are now viewed and treated as serious as any other adult member of the community, and not perceived as mistakes ordinarily.

Also, Phillips (2002:138) writing about a similar initiation rite for young unmarried girls, performed by women's society and meant to educate, regulate conduct and perform special services in the lives of the Mende speaking people of Sierra Leone has this to say about the rite:

Traditionally this included all the ritual knowledge and many of the practical skills women needed throughout life and paralleled the training given to young men by the Poro Society. Proper attitudes towards their future husbands, sexual behaviour, childbearing, and rearing were all expounded to young girls during Sande initiation. Mende membership in the society remains an essential precondition to marriage and acceptance as a responsible adult woman.

According to Phillips, the aim and function of the rite of passage among the Mende was to protect the virginity of the girls until the expiration of the period of indoctrination of the girls into adulthood which was, traditionally, often preceded by marriage. The culture as explained definitely serves as a means of check and balance by preventing the young girls from illicit sex life before marriage.

Laye in *The African Child*, like Mbiti also believes the teachings the circumcised were exposed to in faraway Guinea are not really mysterious in nature, but traditional etiquettes that are expected in male adults and delivered to the boys in a sacred manner in Laye (1978: 107):

The teaching we received in the bush, far from all prying eyes, had nothing mysterious about it... These lessons, the same as had been taught to all those who had gone before us, confined themselves to outlining the sort of conduct befitting a man: to be absolutely straightforward, to cultivate all the virtues that go to make an honest man, to fulfil our duties towards God, towards our parents, our superiors and our neighbour. And we had to tell nothing of what we learned, either to women or to the uncircumcised; neither had we to reveal any of the secret rites of circumcision. That is the custom.

The rite of excision in Africa could be said to be the highest attainment of maturity that an individual could pass through so as to gain acceptance and recognition in a community. The experience among male children is received with every interest; the pains notwithstanding. On the other hand, the circumcision among the Zaar was normally done during the dry season, around January and February, when the dusty and cold harmattan is 'biting', the boys would normally be taken to a river early enough to have their bath. In the river their guides would sometimes cut out whips and distribute to them and divide them into pairs to beat each other like the *Fulani sharo* in Northern Nigeria. Any boy that cried for his partner would normally be given additional strokes of the cane by the *burzhya*. The *burzhya* themselves instil their various punishments to their wards, nephews and cousins that they had brought apart from the general one.

The boy's food is brought by women who do not menstruate or give birth again, because they are considered clean and traditionally permitted to take roles in some acts of secrecy. Masquerades do not beat or scare such old women. The food is usually collected at a distant spot by the *burzhya* and delivered to the boys in the camp. The *burzhya* are also sometimes the masquerades within the camp in the bush. The *burzhya* and other men would sometimes prepare a special meal for the boys with special instructions on how it would be eaten and the boys are not supposed to inquire anything about the meals and concoctions given to them as they have been initiated into adulthood. The boys do not eat salt in the camp, except a traditional type of salt called *kamaashi*. Having reached this stage in their lives, the boys would be allowed to see masquerades and participate in the affairs of men and all the mysteries of the Zaar traditional life. In the camp, the *burzhya* would sometimes tell the boys to go and kill a rat and bring them to the camp or they would go and bring out a masquerade without the assistance of the elders in the camp.

When the circumcised are about to leave the camp and go home, the circumcised boy's parents will sew a fairly long jumper that touches the knee and traditional bags, *jigha*, that is usually hung on the shoulder and taken to their sons and wards in the camp.

The day that they would disperse to the village for a reunion with their parents again was usually a day of festivity in the village and its environs. There would be a pandemonium of drummers and dancers. The boys would now wear their new dresses from the bush and hang their decorated leather bags with all their faces covered with a special type of soft long sorrel fibres, *tulub*, so as to conceal their identities from their eagerly and impatiently waiting mothers.

The boys will still be accompanied to the village by masquerades, and their first place of call was the *gung's* (Chief) house where people are dancing and eating. If the *gung's* son(s) is among the newly circumcised, the *burzhya* and masquerades would stand at a distance and raise high a different boy and ask the chief's wives:

gwàanii' *ghenyaâ*
↓ ↓
Yours-that this-interrogation

Is this yours?

The chief's wife would say 'no' if it is not her son. They would sometimes deliberately keep raising other people's sons and eventually raise the chief's son. If the wife identifies her son, she would then emerge forward to receive her son, and traditionally the masquerades would give her two strong lashes of their cane that her body would bleed. This was really a rough and bitter experience for any wife of a chief whose children were mostly boys. But because of the importance placed on male children in the African society, the experience was worth it and a pride after all. What woman would not want to be a chief's wife after all?

Immediately the *gung's* wife endures the pain and receive her son, it would be ensued by pandemonium, jubilation and ululation: *gālālā! gālālā!! gālālā!!!* From all the other women that have gathered and every woman would now rush for a reunion with her son after four weeks of separation with endurance, hardship and painful experiences in the wilderness. The boys would dance in the chief's palace for some time and then begin to go from house to house, where they are presented with gifts of groundnuts or tiger nuts that will be stuck inside their new leather bags.

At home with their parents now, they were considered mature because all males are not considered to be adults until they undergo the initiation rituals. The newly circumcised will not talk with their mothers for the first three days and will not dip their hands to fetch gruel and water from the water pots. They can only be served by their younger sisters. They are now men and cannot relate with the uncircumcised boys (*gàghzèm*) who are looked upon as women. The uncircumcised eat food inside the family compound with women while the newly circumcised boys would now eat outside the family compound with their fathers and other men. It is during such occasions that stories about men of valour that had lived, legends and other expositions and revelations about the beliefs of the Zaar people are made

known to them. The circumcised would now start deceiving the uncircumcised boys too about the mysteries surrounding the initiation just as was done to them before their journey to the wilderness. Some would even create names of unimaginable girls that they were married to in the bush just to confuse and make the uncircumcised (*gàghzèm*) boys eager and anxious about their own time. From this moment the circumcised boys will continue wearing short jumpers. But when they are fully mature in age, their mode of dressing would change to a decorated leather apron, *ladsheri*, for special outings and occasions.

A similar ritual described by the late Nigerian Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa-Balewa, is described in *A Right Honourable Gentleman* by Trevor Clark. The description of the circumcision rite, though polemic, seems to vividly absorb the Zaar traditional circumcision rite above in the areas of setting, significance, symbolism and the communal engagement. Tafawa-Balewa in Clark (1991:32) narrates the process of the ritual in:

In the northern provinces of Nigeria there are many pagan tribes who are still in the primitive stage...They have their own customs and beliefs which they honour very much...There had never been a time when they seemed to think of any change in their beliefs... These pagans we will take as the original people of Hausa land or of Nigeria generally...These pagans have their own schools of their own creation where the future generations of the tribe are taught the beliefs, the rules and the way of life of their people. Here the elders are the tutors. Usually, this schooling begins seriously when the child reaches the age of nine (9). It is the age for the circumcision [sic] of children with the pagans. During that time all the children of the tribe of that age will be grouped together and taken into the bush, to a lonely place where they are circumcised. They are left there to look after themselves for a period of about four (4) weeks. During this time only some carefully selected elders pay them a visit. They are tried in all sorts of things. They are made to endure pain, hunger, and thirst. They are trained to be brave and hardworking. In fact, it is during these weeks that the children are inducted in all the affairs and secrets of their tribe. After the four (4) weeks of trial, it is usually a custom that a very big festival is called by the affected tribe in which all the other tribes of the neighbouring villages will be invited. After this festival, the circumcised boys are then considered as equal members of the tribe. It is at this time that their fathers give them freedom to cultivate their own individual farms after the work on the family communal one. The children take great pride in reaching this stage.

Taking into cognizance the period in which this description of the ritual took place most societies in the Northern part of Nigeria were still not very exposed to the outside world and modernity was illusive, one cannot emphatically conclude that it refers to only the Zaar traditional circumcision rite. Though polemic and one cannot authenticate the particular tribe and its ritual being described here, but, to refuse to acknowledge the striking similarity with the Zaar circumcision rite is to deliberately decipher the issues discussed and engage in academic jingoism. The Zaar people share lots of similar customs

and traditions with other tribes in North Eastern Nigeria like the Higi, Burra, Gwoza in Adamawa and Borno states, Angas, Mupun, Mwaghavul in Plateau and many more within the region that the writer cannot authenticate and substantiate.

Concept of Performance theory

Performance in any African setting involves celebration with dances, costumes and sometimes accompanied with masquerading to demonstrate the common cultural heritage of the people. Any investigation in theatre and performance theory is a deliberate attempt to delve into key issues about the role of the theatre in cultural matters. Performance as a genre in the arts has been defined by various scholars and what seems obvious and common to most are the mention of the words 'time' 'space' 'performer' and 'audience.'

A brief look at two are Richard Schechner's definition in Okam (2009:38) who considers performance "as a theoretical category and as a practice has expanded explosively. It now comprises panoply of genres ranging from play, to popular entertainments, to theatre, dance, and music to secular acts and rituals, to intercultural experiments and more." According to Okam (2009:38-39):

Performance necessarily means an expression fostered by phenomenon, delivered through the creativity of an artist for the purpose of consumption. It involves the role of the audience and performer, but above all it is a movement, not a monument of a particular phenomenon presented, represented through effective action.

From the two definitions, most performances as a popular form of entertainment are intrinsically related to cultural forms of a community where their collective destiny are replicated. The performances are, to a large extent, determined by the availability of "resources as materials, performers, audience and venue" (Harding 200:5). Richard Schechner's performance theory has not only been revolutionary, but "has consistently challenged traditional practices and perspectives of theatre, performance and ritual" ...as he believes that drama /performance is not restricted to the stage, but a continuous process in human endeavour that occurs in our daily tasks/engagements, and it is more of a cross-cultural phenomenon. According to him "engaging in 'real life' is often indistinguishable from 'role play'..." (Schechner: 2002:143). The re-echo of Shakespeare's popular quote of "all the world's a stage, and all men and women merely players" elucidates Schechner's belief in an all-encompassing role play in drama. Schechner's theory believes in a holistic approach to performance where indigenous forms and ethnic diversity are subsumed into a cross-disciplinary entity.

The concept of 'performativity' is closely related to postmodernism which emerged from the western society of post-World War II. Postmodernism sees performance as something that is embedded in the social, political and material world and not naturally artistic or theatrical. This concept is more related to power and knowledge. In his submission about modernism which was solidly championed by Plato and Aristotle, Schechner (2002) holds the view that reality and representation in performance have been destroyed and strongly believes that art and life are uniquely and realistically separate. But he sees the similarity of role play from other areas like psychotherapy sessions which is

closely related to improvisation, though with different objectives, they both deal with the self-conscious and unconscious impulses that performance projects. According to Schechner (2002:110) role playing “reflects the in-built routines, rituals and conventions of everyday life, instilled from birth, and through childhood experience.”

The concept of performing in our daily life is what makes performativity that manifests variedly in daily behaviour which naturally is the root of role play and improvisation. It often manifests in different professions and works of life where professional ethics has shaped specific behaviours and character traits that are associated with the jobs: a soldier, a lawyer, a doctor, a teacher and many others. Though customary as they may look in appearance, these nuances over the years have evolved into modes of performances. Schechner observes that as people engage in their daily routines, they are not always themselves, because they are involved in acting out predetermined roles that are sometimes programmed in: “performing in everyday life involves people in a wide range of activities from solo or intimate performances behind closed doors to small group activities to interacting as part of a crowd” (Schechner, 2002:175).

From the discussions, the essay uses the above explications about performance as theoretical framework to submit that the *Zaar* rite of passage (male circumcision) and similar African indigenous forms are concretely encapsulated and subsumed in the intellectual idea of the genre of performance art that Nwamuo (1984:41) describes as traditional African theatre in:

Traditional African theatre is drama, it is dance, music, mime, various linguistic twists, proverbs, costumes, magic and even implicates the visual and plastic arts...It is part of the people themselves and is rooted in African culture. Traditional African theatre performs concrete social, political and religious functions in the community, without major restrictions placed upon it by physical limitations or time barrier as in contemporary African theatre.

Schechner (2005:149) agrees with above submission and re-echo Nwamuo’s perception of ritual as performance and genre and believes that “entertainment and ritual are braided together, neither one being the “original” of the other.” Rappaport (1999:37), unequivocally observe that, “unless there is performance, there is no ritual.” Hence, the need to see the *Zaar* rite of passage as performance that appeals to the community and its significance in the social and religious life of the people can never be underestimated.

Cultural Values of the Initiation cum social control

All cultural performances bear some imprints to the sum total life of the community members that are the performers/actors and audience of the phenomenon enacted or re-enacted. While performance may superficially appear to be mere entertainment to other people outside the belief of the community concerned, what is presented has spiritual, psychological and emotional impact on the community. The cultural milieu is sustained because the phenomenon is the ‘soul’ of the larger society and the link between the present and the past. Among the *Zaar* speaking people, the rite of passage significantly plays important roles in the affairs of the community by creating a balance and maintaining social order.

Therefore, every growing young boy expects that someday he would leave for the great occasion, no matter his fear and closeness to his parents. And the first lesson to a Zaar male child to cast away fear in him and encourage bravery in the face of any danger. This prepares them to be responsible men in the future that could defend their land and families. The fairy tales, bearing messages to any part of the bush at night during the rite, and other difficult tasks are meant to prepare the young boys to cope with hard times and the need to endure pain and suffering. Socially, it makes them potential 'soldiers' who would be relied upon to defend their community from their individual or collective enemy. The rite creates a sense of belonging by making the young boys not only proud, but also as custodians of their culture. Though young, they are respected by the non-initiates and elders as well. Their present state demands that they restrict themselves to what is acceptable to the society and avoid any association that would demean their newly acquired status. Some decorum is created and the boys are eager to demonstrate their loyalty to their parents and society at large.

Recognition and acceptance of the initiated boys are also enhanced. All adults in the community relate with them as grown-ups without hesitation. The boys can now run any errand that demands secrecy for adults without any suspicion of revealing the message sent. A good lesson of privacy is encouraged and flippancy discouraged. This creates orderliness in a community. One of the great values of the Zaar initiation rite is its quest to live the present with the past and ensure the continuity of the collective fate of the Zaar people by immortalizing their common cultural affinity. As is suggestive of any rite of passage in Africa, the initiation breaks the circumcised boys' attachment to their maternal parents who are weak and feeble; and anything considered immature or childish must not be displayed by the boys that have attained a position of maturity and sense of responsibility in the community. The boys now have a defined relationship with their mothers and the female folk entirely. As 'mature' boy, they are expected to think and behave like their fathers; help their younger ones and assist in cultivating the land. At this age they begin to learn more from mature men and cultivate good habits of how to live with their future wives. As a means of social control, waywardness, promiscuity and indolence are negative traits that are sanctioned and could lead to the severe discipline of such boys by the appropriate masquerade in a shrine. Among the Zaar people, like in many African societies, the process and phenomenon of initiation as a performance is a traditional mode of socialization that affords the moulding and incorporation of the young boys into the corporate society that defines their well-being. The lessons learned at each stage of the passage provides the *modus operandi* of the community which, in turn, ensures the overall peace and stability of the members. The social control that emanates from the initiation process, definitely, provides the contemporary challenge to investigate the past with a view to drawing a parallel with the present.

Conclusion

Performances are prevalent in many African societies and their cultural relevance in the community varies from one particular culture to the other. Their commonality lies in their essence and roots that evolved from religious, traditional and cultural milestones. The performances are held with high domestic value and they create opportunities where the traditional members could vent, dissipate and amplify their cultural narratives. The Zaar

rite of passage is one of such cultures that, through its traditional forms, was able to inculcate a sense of discipline, maturity, bravery, responsibility and more, so as to ensure conformity to the norms and values of the society and maintain an equilibrium.

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