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### **An Analysis of the Ògwù Traditional Festival of the Igala People as a Theatre of Mythological Metaphysics**

By

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#### **Abstract**

The concern of this paper is the mythology and mysticism that differentiates African performances/theatre from the Western theatre type which borders on the re-enactment of human actions. The African theatre encapsulates the activities of both the mortal and the immortal worlds. It transcends the world of the living/mor-

tal and has its root in the supernatural world. It is this reverence for supreme deities, ancestral spirits, and other benevolent spirits that characterizes the Ògwù traditional festival of the Igala people of Kogi State, Nigeria that the paper explores. Innocent Asouzu's mythological model of the concept of African metaphysics drives the discourse. The concept posits that nature has hidden secrets and mysteries that could be revealed through beliefs and practices relating to ultimate reality. The core of the concept is that a thing exists whether seen or unseen, and it is upon this premise that Africans believe that spirits exist even when they don't see them, knowing that their qualities are immaterial. The paper concludes that the Ògwù traditional festival is theatre of mythological metaphysics given that the content of the performance hinges on the spirit essence, mythology, and mysticisms. The theatre is assumed to encapsulate the activities of the spirits and those of human beings.

**Key Words:** Ògwù Performance, Mythology, Mysticism, Metaphysics, Theatre.

### **Introduction**

The Chinese, Indians, Japanese, Arabs, Europeans, and Americans have their own forms of theatre which are peculiar to their needs, aspirations and worldviews. The

theatre is a manifestation of people's culture, which is drawn from their experiences. There could be different reasons for people's theatrical performances. The reasons could range from war, religion, occupation, and social etiquette. Osanyin enunciates more on the above assertion thus:

The realm of culture is the matrix of activities of the African. All his creative and artistic endeavors go into the crucible – his finest moment and his glorious hour. The theatre, being the synthesis of all the art and the melting pot of all creative activities is particularly to the African, a communal institution, life is fulfilled in creativity. For the purification of the soul, a man needs to create. (153).

Before the influx of the colonial masters into Africa, Africans had their ways of life, their norms, peculiar aspirations and ethos. The African people existed like any other people elsewhere. Based on the above premise, Illah succinctly observed that:

... and with varying emphasis into African systems of thoughts, beliefs, modes of worship, and generally into African cosmologies... African people have an approximately similar way of looking at their existence – the past, the present, and the future within a cosmic framework... in other words, there is what we call an 'African religion' (1).

What is central to the people of Africa is that they have their reverence for the almighty God, deities, ancestral spirits and other benevolent spirits, coupled with masquerading, dance, musical entertainment, feasting and other social activities. Nwabueze highlights that:

I have drawn attention elsewhere to the complex nature of African festivals and their affinity with Western theatre, taking in Igbo masquerade drama as a paradigm... I have also accepted to demonstrate that since the ritual that envelopes some of these festivals have been punctured by either alien intervention or acculturation, these ritual performances have been forced to yield to the demands of entertainment, the ritual being a mere umbilical cord that links the present with the past (94).

The act of masquerading, dance, and music ritual display is a serious endeavor as it is an obvious representation of the people's worldview. The essence of Western,

American, and Asian theatres is a re-enactment of actions. In the same vein, every activity in a typical African festival is either a re-enactment of actions of the past ancestors and gods, or true representations of such actions. The subjugation of the African people by the colonial masters has failed to destroy the fabric of the African theatre form because it is a theatre that transcends the world of the living/mortal and has its root in the supernatural world.

### **The Igala People**

The Igala people who live in the Eastern flank of Kogi State in present day Nigeria form the largest single ethnic group in the State. The word Igala is used to describe the people as well as the land occupied by the people. There are pockets of Igala in Anambra, Delta, Edo, and Enugu States of Nigeria. The Igala land is bounded in the North East by Benue State, South East by Enugu State, South South by Anambra State, and South West by Edo State. The language has great similarities with Yoruba of the South West, and Itsekiri in Delta State of Nigeria. The Igala kingship system is monarchical. Attah is the titular and spiritual head of the Igala. As Ijoma emphasizes, 'the Igala monarchy has sometimes been described as one of the classical examples of kingship in Africa' (19).

In spite of the people's adherence to Christianity and Islam faith, they still hold on firmly to their traditional beliefs, norms and traditional religion. In Igala traditional religion, there is the belief in life after death. The dead, who are now the ancestors have the capacity to conduct the affairs of the living through the protection and guidance of the entire community, and in the process, ensure cosmic harmony between the mundane and the celestial worlds. The Almighty God is at the apex of the Igala while other lesser gods such as ancestral spirits, deities, and other relevant spirits are answerable to the Almighty God. There is also the place for guardian spirits. It is on this premise that Boston opines that:

A man's relationship with his guardian spirit and with the other ancestors expresses that his destiny is entirely of his own making, but is determined partly by forces beyond his control (18).

Among the Igala people, the traditional religion bears significant relevance to the observance and celebration of the numerous traditional festivals. In most cases, such festivals are celebrated in honour of the supernatural beings that usually make impact and input in the lives of the people. Ritual activities, masquerade displays, music and dance, are central to the celebration of all the festivals in Igala land.

To the Igala, perhaps like any other ethnic group in Africa, masquerades are the ancestral spirits that regenerate into the moral world to share their goodwill with their off-springs. Talking of masquerades (incarnate beings) phenomenon in Igala culture, Miachi observes that:

There is constant interaction and active movement between the world of the ancestors and the world of the living. In the interaction, the dead are encountered physically and are consulted directly through the masquerade as well. In other words, and this may be unique to the Igala, there is direct interaction between the living Igala and their masquerades who are synonymous with their dead (45).

In a nut-shell, it is held among the Igala that the dead can communicate directly with the living through masquerades in form of performances in verbal instructions, songs, dances, and exhibition of brutality. The Igala theatre, like that of some ethnic groups in Africa, has its hallmark in the cosmogony and the worldview of the people.

### **The Cosmic Order**

Among the Igala it is believed that whichever way one lives, whatever one does, and whatever achievements, successes or failures one encounters on earth are ordered, in fact, predestined. It is believed that destiny like the lines on the palm of our hands can never be washed away. This simply implies that before one is born to this world, one would have taken an oath with the Almighty God on how one would like to exist on earth. Apart from the Almighty God there are other numerous spirits who may equally control the affairs and destiny of man. Following closely to 'Ojo', the almighty God, are the ancestral spirits, "Abegwu". The ancestral spirits play a vital role in the life of the Igala people. They have the capacity to relate with the Almighty God, plead on behalf of their off-springs who are the living Igala people, and waive off problems, sicknesses, and death. They usher in good will, peace, prosperity, and above all, bring children to their off-springs through reincarnation. The Igala ancestral spirits cherish constant sacrifices from their off-springs. After Abegwu (ancestors) comes the Ebo priests and priestesses of the various gods, the spirits that lead worships. The average Igala man fears Ebo greatly. One Ebo may be harsh and tough while another may be mild and humble. Whenever any evil is identified in the community, people usually seek the services of Ebo so

that the culprit may be identified, exposed, and disgraced which ultimately leads to sickness and sometimes death. People usually reach out to the Ebo through Ifa oracle. Boston captures the Igala ancestral spirits in the following words:

Ancestor cults of various kinds are central to their (Igala) religious system... there is also an important cult of the earth as well as cults of diverse spirits known collectively as Ebo. The latter includes the spirit of small pox, Iye, spirits associated with water, Alijenu and other spirits inhabiting the fringes of cultivated land (20).

Very close to Ebo cult is Ane (earth shrine). The earth cult is concerned with good relationships between neighbors occupying the same locality. The earth priest often prays that persons with malicious and evil thoughts in their hearts may be punished. The earth goddess has the capacity to cause a swollen sickness, and if such a person dies, he/she is buried in a distant place far from common burial grounds. The wrath of the earth goddess often has a tragic repercussion because nobody can dodge or avoid it. Everybody's life depends on the fruit of the earth. According to Miachi 'Earth goddess is feared by Igala because, it is believed that no mortal being can dodge the wrath of the earth as long as we live, and continue to walk on the earth' (120).

With all the spiritual protections from the spirits, the Igala people still seek other protections from Ógwù medicine/charms. The charms are worn, rubbed, infused into blood or drunk. A person who is verse in Ógwù is often revered in Igala culture. He is usually considered to be a man of honor. He is feared and respected because in colloquial term, 'he has been cooked' and as a result no man can harm him. Every other person must reverence him. His appellation is Agbiti, the strong man. Not in terms of physical strength but spiritual. The man may appear weak and feeble, but metaphysically he can demobilize all the physically strong enemies.

In Igala cosmology, all the activities, duties and strength of the almighty God, the ancestral spirits, the deities, and the earth goddess are divined and manipulated by the Ifa oracle and its diviner.

### **The Concept of African Metaphysics**

Metaphysics is science in a sense because, like science, it tries to explain what exists in the world even though it may not be empirical thereby leaning towards

philosophy that thrives in abstraction. The conception is subliminal as it anchors in mythology and mystic characters. Every issue in metaphysics is phenomenal as its experience hangs on spirits and the essence of spirits. It is in consonance with the above that Henri Bergson defined metaphysics as ‘... the science which claims to dispense with symbols’ (162) metaphysics is a philosophy and science of unusual character; something that transcends above the normal. There have been diverse views and definitions of metaphysics right from the era of Parmenides who is often referred to as the real enunciator of Western metaphysics before Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Immanuel Kant. In summary of their views, metaphysics became divided into three major components: rational theology, rational cosmology, and rational psychology. On such premise, Ayer succinctly define metaphysics as, ‘that branch of philosophical discourse which deals with the fundamental question about the structure of reality’ (25). Innocent Asouzu identified two models of metaphysics such as ‘the science oriented model and the mythological model’ (1). It is believed that nature has hidden secrets and mysteries which can be revealed through appeal to nature itself or which nature could be made to reveal. This way, metaphysics takes the form of a set of beliefs and practices in relation to the ultimate reality. According to Ruch and Anyanwu, “Africans have their own popular metaphysics, namely, ‘mythology... Living in a community, the African believes that there are mysterious forces surrounding him...’” (163). African metaphysics must be noted as the African form of understanding, perceiving, interpreting and making meaning out of interactions among beings.

Africans see substance as the quality of ‘beingness’, which could be seen, felt or divined through oracular means. What constitutes substance is the evidence that a thing exists whether perceived or not. Africans do not perceive spirits yet they believe that they exist, knowing that their qualities are immaterial. Generally speaking, Africans believe that the activities of the spirits often affect the lives of people. In this regard, African metaphysics is a derivation from Innocent Asouzu’s mythological model that treats metaphysics as a set of beliefs and practices in relation to the ultimate reality

### **Theatre of Mythological Metaphysics**

The theatre of mythological metaphysics is a derivation from the spirit essence, mythology, mysticism and magic that are inherent in African performance/theatre. The theatre encapsulates the activities of both the mortal and the immortal worlds.

In such theatre, the activities that usually take place may not be fully comprehended by mere mortal reasoning. Most activities inherent in the performance may be interpreted according to the accepted norms of the spirit world. Describing the Obatala festival in Ede, Banham quotes Beier as saying:

It is essentially difficult to describe a Yoruba religious festival. It is not what happens that really matters, nor indeed is it important what is done. What does matter is the intense spiritual experience that can be shared, even by strangers. During this events sacrifices, prayers, drumming, singing, dancing all combine to create an atmosphere, an emotional situation which allows the worshipers to come near the god...(2)

In African theatre of mythological metaphysics, the content is entertainment, supplication and worship. In other words, as the performance goes on, the performers are engaged in communication with the supernatural powers through a series of incantations, ritual activities, supplications and prayers as they pass through the state of possession, ecstasy and trance. At this point, healing can take place. It is also the state of prophesy. Rudy Scott, establishing the relationship between theatre and religion observes that, "Greek theatre began as a tribute to a Greek god... This coincidence is more than coincidental" (1). In consonance with the observation made by Scott, Joseph Campbell enunciates his view that:

Myth is the secrete opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man...are spontaneous productions of the psychic. (3)

African theatre is religion in its own right, it is a state of performance of miracle. In other words, a state where mystic, astral journey, mystery, possession, ecstasy, trance, and everything sublime is brought together for the enhancement of body, spirit, and soul. Speaking on the same subject, Ball observed that:

...theatre often invokes the sacred. The man, who does not live in awe of something outside himself, is dead. The experience of drama is one of those moments in which a human being sits in awe, wonder, in admiration of something outside of itself (5).

African theatre of mythological metaphysics is awe-inspiring as it is laden with

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unusual and unfathomable occurrences. The theatre supplies us with an apt metaphor for a discourse on what has traditionally been the subject matter of metaphysics. Tassi has posited that The point of metaphysics...is to articulate intellectually being qua being, which he explains as, “things and not events as they are caught up in the act, or the performance, which brings them to presence”. He proceeds to say that, “In nature as in the theatre, what comes to presence does so together with the performance that presents It”. It may be concluded, therefore, that African theatre of mythological metaphysics is a reflection of what every African theatre enacts. Also, Tassi aptly describes the theatre of metaphysics in the following words:

What comes to presence on the stage is a representation of something and not the thing itself. The metaphysical notion of presence, then, turns out not to be an ordinary notion. It is determined by our understanding of the presenting act. Whenever this relationship is reversed, the result is metaphysical deformity (3).

In a nutshell, African theatre of metaphysics is a subliminal theatre form that concerns itself with the sublimity of the spirit essence in the cosmic world of the African people. To this end, the mythological theatre is usually performed with specific injunctions for it to be a sacred and holy act.

### **Ògwù Phenomenon**

In Igala, the words Ògwù, Ógwú and Ógwù are used to mean different concepts but they are strongly linked to each other in the phenomenon. Ógwù simply means medicine/charm (curative, healing, and protective). Ògwù means feat, and Ógwú means war. In times of war, Ógwú the Igala warrior must have himself ‘roasted’ or ‘cooked’ in Ógwù charm/medicine. Such Ógwù or charm used by the warrior can turn the enemy’s gunshot into water or such gunshot may be deflected from its target. The warrior who succeeds in overpowering his enemy in Ógwú battlefield or any person who inadvertently spills human blood is said to be possessed by Ògwù feat. The process of getting the warrior rid of such Ogwu feat is through a ritual known as Ògwù performance or theatre. The commander-in-chief of Igala warriors is known as Akogwu: he that leads the warriors to the battlefield.

The Ògwù phenomenon is one of the most universally acclaimed and deeply rooted phenomena in Igalaland. Ògwù is about one of the aspects of the people’s cultural performances that is strongly tied to their military activities. It is also a

demonstration of the strong links between the Igala people and the world of the spirits. Ògwù is a very remarkable feat in Igalaland such that a statement of admonition has been coined against any person who exhibits irrational behavior such as being implacable, cantankerous, and pugnacious. The statement is ‘leave his way, he is in a possessive state of Ògwù or ‘he is under the influence of Ògwù feat’. It is a way of saying that such a person who exhibits such irrational behavior is mad. According to Armstrong, “the near-mad behaviour of a successful killer is Ògwù, and the water of a blacksmith’s forge along with other ritual activities, are used to cool the person down...” (235).

In Igala, Ògwù manifests itself in the stillborn, in the birth of twin children, Ejima, in blacksmith Agwalo, hunter Ajode, particularly a hunter who had killed any wild animal such as a buffalo, a leopard, a lion etc., and who had taken a human life. Each one of these Ògwù medium has a particular ritual attached to them if their feat must abate and their life stabilized.

In the case of hunters and warriors, after their encounter with a lion, a leopard, or a buffalo, or an encounter with human foes who would have fallen victims of their machetes or guns, a sacrifice for appeasement as well as appropriate ritual must be conducted immediately. In order for the spirit of debacle and war to be put in check, the blood of the victim must be licked immediately, and the same blood sprinkled on the warrior’s eyes. Thereafter, Omi, that is Ògwù water must be prepared so that the ritual of ‘face washing’ can take place. Omi Ògwù, ‘Ògwù water’, is a concoction which is taken by the warrior, the remaining of which is used in washing the face of the warrior. Omi Ògwù is realized from the washing of the blacksmith’s forge. Speaking on the Omi Ògwù phenomenon among the Idoma people, Armstrong narrates this vivid account:

...whenever a man begins to be crazed with Ògwù people say that Ògwù must be washed from his face so that he may begin to behave properly...the sorts of persons who wash Ògwù from a person’s face are the blacksmiths (ajijje). The things that they use for washing the face are the leaves of the Okopi (meni oil tree), a cock or a duck and water... (301).

Among the Ògwù rituals is the Ògwù Eda, the cutting of Ògwù. Ògwù Eda is one of the most serious rituals inherent in Ògwù performance. At the special ritual performance of Ògwù, animals and birds such as rams, dogs, cocks, and ducks may be used. The Ògwù Eda ritual is performed as a rite of passage at the death of a

warrior. In this ritual, a dog is first of all brought in with a rope tied around its neck. It is dragged along the length and breadth of the village until it dies, then it is thrown away amidst incantations. While the Ògwù music plays on, a ram is bound and dropped at the performance arena. The warrior who does the cutting is informed ahead of time. He dances with his sharp machete. In the midst of the ensuing commotion, he descends on the ram and severs its head from its body in one swoop. The remains of the animal is used for a ritual purpose. Another important feature of the Igala Ògwù is the concept of left handedness. The only person who is permitted to use the left hand freely is the Ògwù medium who would have fought in a war, killed a lion, a leopard, or a buffalo. Such a person can freely drink with the left hand or shake hands with the left hand. According to Drewel, “left handedness involves spiritual communication. The right hand is used by men, while the gods use left” (411).

Another characteristic of Ògwù phenomenon is possession state and trance. During the ritual performance which is characterized by dance, it is observed that the Ògwù mediums are possessed and accordingly remain in trance as they move away in astral journey. In this essence, the Ògwù spirit guides, guards, and aids the warriors in their bid to achieve a feat during a hunting expedition, at the battlefield and at the performance arena.

Another area of significance in Ògwù phenomenon of Igala is the use of red colour, ‘Ekipikpa’. Red symbolizes danger and bloodshed. Ògwù is associated with blood, therefore everything about Ògwù is enacted in red. The costumes are red in colour. Some props like Uloko, ‘red feather’, are used. The red colour in Ògwù phenomenon symbolizes fiery, belligerent, as well as furious temperament. In the same capacity, Barnes is of the view that;

In Benin shrines...the Ògwù medium was depicted in a war costume, wearing or holding the tools and weapons of his varied occupations. Often, his costumes, and significantly, his eyes were painted red. To describe someone as having red eyes was a way of indicating he has violent temper and capacity for causing harm...the Yoruba who also use red eyes for the same symbolic purposes, captured the ferocity of Ogun... (49)

Ògwù is a sacred phenomenon which is controlled by the spirit of debacle, trauma, thaumaturgy, fiery, fearsomeness, brutality, and at the end of it all, pacification and restitution of the supernatural powers through application of Ògwù water and

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Ògwù performance.

### **Ògwù Performance**

The Ògwù theatre as a theatre of mythological metaphysics is a derivation from the content of the performance which hinges on the spirit essence, mythology, mysticism, trauma, debacle, phenomenal prodigy and thaumaturgy, and at the end, pacification and restitution. The Ògwù theatre of mythological metaphysics speaks about the life we live through staging. The primordial function of the Ògwù theatre is to bring the Ògwù character to presence using his body as a threshold for the supernatural powers. There is a metaphysical quest that stands behind the acting method of Ògwù theatre. The Ògwù characters try to reach a state of affair where their bodies are employed as threshold for the spirits. In Ògwù performance, what transpires in the arena is a synthesis of what exists in the supernatural world. As Aristotle puts it while commenting on theatre in his poetics, “theatre imitates an action in the form of action and not as literature does, in form of narration...” in Ògwù theatre what takes place is an imitation of the performance of being. The Ògwù performers are not referring to the act of the spirits but performing the act itself. In a conventional theatre, what appears on stage is representational, but in Ògwù performance, human personalities are used as major contacts as they become possessed to serve as icons of the supernatural presence.

The Ògwù theatre goes beyond an ordinary tribute to the ancestors and all other relevant Ògwù spirits. Its essence is to bring both mortal and immortal together in a common awareness, aspiration, and experience. It is a theatre founded in the people’s myth. Campbell enunciates that, “myth is the secrete through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation” (1). The Ògwù theatre invokes the sacred. The moment of Ògwù performance is a moment of awe, wonder, thaumaturgy and elevation to something unfathomable. The theatre concerns mythological metaphysics, relationship with the supernatural, ethnics, as well as our relationship with each other.

It is difficult to explain how, during the Ògwù performance as a preparation for war, or a hunting expedition, the performers will shoot at each other with loaded double barreled guns and what the audience would see is that the bullets would fall on the ground, or water will simply gush out of the gun’s barrel. Sometimes, the bullets used for the shooting are found in a mystical pot placed close to the performance arena, or the bullets will simply return to the assailant. How does one

fathom a situation where a performer is cut with a cutlass before the audience and the human body will turn to a stone with a spark of fire from the blade of the machete. In what way can it be explained as the performance rages on, suddenly the dancers will fizzle into the thin air only to surface again after ten to fifteen minutes, and much more?

The fundamental issue in Ògwù theatre as a theatre of mythological metaphysics hinges on the fact that it transcends over and above the traditional functions of theatre. The performers are heavily committed not to enjoyment but to supplications, adoration and worship of the Ògwù spirits who in turn must safeguard, safe guide, and safe conduct their affairs. They release themselves to the spirits and they are in turn possessed. With the presence of the spirits in them, they become fortified, unmolested, and untouchable. As they go out hunting, or move to the battle field, they stand face to face with enemies; the said enemies, whether beasts or human beings, will be tamed instantly as they are demobilized with Ijele Phenomenon. Ijele is a phenomenon in Igala culture that can render the strongest man or beast impotent immediately he sets an eye on a warrior. In the course of the performance, there is a show of prowess among the Ògwù mediums. The warrior who is deeply entrenched in Ògwù phenomenon has the capacity to render another Ògwù warrior impotent by incapacitating him of all his powers. He can be transfixed to a spot as long as possible depending on the warrior's good will. In this case, each Ògwù warrior has to rededicate and re-fortify himself if he must be acknowledged as a proper warrior.

The Ògwù mythological metaphysical theatre satisfies every segment of conventional theatre. It has its director who is spiritually fortified and who rises above every other person within the context of Ògwù phenomenon. He directs the performance according to the dictates of the spirits. He offers the appropriate sacrifices as he tries to meet all Ògwù injunctions. He directs the performance with caution bearing in mind the spiritual injunctions. He arbitrates between the mortal and immortal powers. Above all, he must ensure to keep himself pure and sanctified. He is a man of character with his outstanding records of valour, spirituality, and mysticism. He is a prolific warrior who has enmeshed himself in Igala mystery. He is a mystagogue and a mystique. His appellation is Agbiti, the strong one. The performance arena is often a sacred grove free from sacrilege and profanity. It is simply a melting pot between the mortal and the immortal worlds. The costume and costuming are defined such that they don't change. No creativity comes into

the making of the costume as the red and white colours, including the designs, are prescribed by the spirits. The Ògwù costume casts grotesque appearances upon Ògwù performers.

The rehearsals start only during the Ògwù initiation rituals. The initiates are kept in a sacred abode where they learn the secret of Ògwù phenomenon. The rehearsals last for fourteen days. The performance is a dance drama particularly when the performance is staged either as a rite of passage, a demonstration of military prowess, or as an anticipatory psychic management. The interpretations of the drama are only done with the knowledge and understanding of Igala cosmology. The Ògwù props are dedicated to, and sanctified by the spirits. The props have the spirit essence, and as a result, they become venefic. No Ògwù gunshot will miss its target either in the battlefield or hunting expedition. In the same vein, Ògwù Machete, during the Ògwù Eda ceremony, the cutting of Ògwù, will never miss its mark when cutting either the sacrificial ram or dog.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it may safely be said that the Ògwù theatre of mythological metaphysics is an elaborate demonstration of what may be termed as the African concept of indigenous science than an art form. The science can be understood through the Igala cosmology and worldview. It is ultra-critical describing the Ògwù performers as artist since their roles are ultra-mundane. They are simply clays in the hands of the spirits. They are molded, shaped and reshaped in order to assume a form which must be useful for the wellbeing of the people. They are imbued with spirit essence which gives them the enablement to get into the state of transformation during the course of performance, then possession state, and trance at the climax. When they dance, sing, drum, dramatize, ululate, and exhibit all the other forms of behavioral manifestations, they are narrowing the gap that secludes the living from the immortal beings.

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