

INSTRUMENT OF STABILITY: A STUDY OF MASQUERADE IN IGBO TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

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Abstract

The masquerade enforces order and discipline in Igbo traditional society. Masquerading is a very effective means that sustained peace and order, settlement of disputes, good government among Igbo communities in the past. The roles performed by the masquerade in Igbo society seems to be dwindling at this age due to westernization; western religion and globalization. It seems that crimes are in the increase in recent times than in the past when people feared the masquerade so much. The study therefore, sought to assess and evaluate the roles of the masquerade in Igbo traditional society to ascertain its place in the modern Igbo society. The study is descriptive in nature. Data collection was through oral consultations, observations and library sources. The study shows that masquerades perform various roles in Igbo traditional society. Masquerades are instrumental in maintaining law and order, acting as an agent of justice among other roles. The roles performed by the masquerade helped in the stability of Igbo traditional society. However the roles performed by the masquerades have been very much affected by westernization, as most of the roles they perform have been taken over by modern agencies, such as the police and other law enforcement agencies. It is advisable that the modern agencies should work diligently to ensure that the modern Igbo society will be more stable than what it was in the past. A stabilized society is a peaceful and a progressive one.

Introduction

Masquerade cult is practised in most African societies, Igbo land of Nigeria inclusive. In Igbo land they are believed to be the spirits of the dead ancestors who manifest in the land of the living through ant hole. The masquerade is for the men-folk and one of the rites of

passage of the people. Nnokwe (2009:65) perceives the adolescent period as the time that marked changes that occur in duties, responsibilities, privileges, social and economic roles and relationship with others. Boys are initiated into masquerade society during the adolescent phase of life, when they are taught different things that must reflect their cognitive, emotional and social functions for meaningful living.

Masquerade had special functions they perform in the society that helps to keep the society in a stable form. Ezenweke (2012:138) declared that “masquerade cult perform some vital social and political roles in many African communities in general and Igbo land in particular such as entertainment, checkmating women who cook late, control men who beat their wives”. The role of the masquerade in Igbo traditional society cannot be overemphasized. They perform the roles of the police. They arrest the evil doers; collect fines and see to it that the entire community is peaceful and united. The study therefore seeks to examine the roles performed by the masquerade in Igbo traditional society to ascertain their relevance in recent times. These roles are the maintenance of law and order, justice, correctitude and entertainment.

Masquerade a sa Rite of Passage

Boys are initiated into the masquerade group at the adolescent age. During that period they are exposed to a very severe and intensive exercise. Ezenweke (2012:139) affirms that through masquerade rites, one is exposed to the full knowledge of the secrets of life. Ezenweke goes on to state that it involves strenuous training at secluded designated places aimed to ascertain the ability to handle difficult situations. Nnokwe (2009:76) on this issue pointed out that “the rigorous exercise was to drive out fear from oneself, so that in time of danger he would not flee, but take courage to defend himself and his family”. It is to be noted that during the adolescent stage, they are taught secret things about the masquerade and the community which they must not disclose to non-initiates. They were also made to confess all the evil things that they had done. They are warned of serious calamities that will befall them, if they do not refrain from their bad behaviours.

Mbiti (1975:96) confirms that “the initiates undergo physical training to overcome difficulties and pain, and to cultivate courage, endurance, perseverance and obedience. The experience equip them mentally, bodily, emotionally and morally”. Harry Triandis et al (1988) on their theory of individualism-collectivism argued that shared values of social groups play a key role in individual cognitive, emotional and social functioning. Under cognitive the initiate now has the knowledge of the secret things that are not meant for everybody. The initiate will begin to think and perceive things in a different way. His childish ideas and thoughts are discarded. Mbiti had stated that the educational experience equip them mentally. How the initiates comprehend things will change automatically. The era of receiving protection as a child will be over, they begin from that period to feel independent. He sees himself as a man and feels superior to women. Igbo (2012:142) states that the initiate “takes on the ways the culture defines for men”. His mind is prepared in the ways and manners men do things. He is so confident that he can stand alone and complete any task. His understanding of things is that, he should be responsible. With this idea in

mind he is able to work as an individual and also co-operate with his group for the unity of the community. However, emotionally, he feels stable. He has learnt to say the truth, to be brave and fearless, to keep secrets. Mbiti also states that they are equipped emotionally and morally. This will go a long way to improve their feeling of self-esteem. Emotional stability binds the individual's actions and that of the group together for the growth of the community. Socially, he learns to relate with others. After the initiation, the adolescent learns to associate well with his peers and other members of his society. Group work, division of labour and unity of purpose are taught and learnt for the development of the individual and the entire community.

Initiation Ceremony

When a male child is sensible and matured enough to keep the secret, he is initiated into the system. It is the duty of *okorobia mmanwu* to determine who is ready to be initiated. The initiation takes place behind a convenient building. The aspirant is ordered to do something hard to be considered fit for initiation. When the male child scales through the tests, his kindred and *okorobi ammanwu* are now convinced beyond all reasonable doubts that the secrecy in masquerading must be revealed to him. The riddles carved on special sticks, or drawn in the sand, were symbols of knowledge to which the initiates now had full access. The initiates were then entitled to know every secret of tribal life, things known by exclusive groups. The rite is at the sacred tree, it was a reminder of the religious life and a symbolic visit to the ancestors, and the spirits who were thought to live there. The occasion was a renewal of the link with the spiritual realities and a reminder that the ancestors were "present" with them. The ceremonies are performed in the presence of masquerades. To disclose the identity of the masquerade, the candidate is made to hold the masquerade by the hand under great fear, he gradually pulls the materials covering the head of the masquerade only to see things for himself and the secret laid bare for him.

Membership of the masquerade cult was meant for only the initiates. During the adolescent stage, one had to be initiated in mmanwu society. According to Unigwe (2000:23); "Mmanwu or masquerades are the spirit beings." They were believed to be the spirits of the dead ancestors according to Igbo tradition. During the actual initiations, there were some rigorous exercises that would be undergone before one is fully admitted. It is the duty of the *Nne-muṅ* to initiate the new members at the *uḷo-muṅ*. In Urualla community, there were four types of *Nne-mmanwu*. They include: *Anyarekwe*, *Onu-ugo*, *Ojo-ogho* and *Aligwo-ekwe*. They come out whenever it was believed that something strange had happened. Also in Urualla community, there were certain categories of masquerades namely: *Onu-Ugocha*, *Oji-onu*, *Okpu-ocha*, *Owa-phia*, *Nwaiwi*, *Mgbadike* etc. They perform special functions during festivals. Women and non-initiates have no right to stand and look at them or converse with them in any way or manner. Those who came out stand the risk of being penalized. According to Nnokwe (2009:44), "Urualla people called masquerade rite *ime mkpacha*". It is done once every year at the second month of the year (February). The opening ceremony would be on *Afo* day, the next *Afo* would be the ceremony proper which would last for four days. On the following *Afo*, the closing ceremony would commence. On

these ceremonies, which lasted for four days, masquerades will fill all the places in the town; fetching out law offenders, making peace where there is no peace and taking over lands that are in dispute. It was a special period in the life of Urualla people.

The Roles of Masquerade in Igbo Traditional Society

Various beings have got some roles to play in their environments. In the same vein, masquerades in the Igbo traditional society play some roles for which they have significance. Otherwise, the masquerades would no longer be in use. Those roles are as follows:

Maintenance of Law and Order

The masquerade is the traditional community police who enforce law and order, and discipline erring members of the society. Offenders are penalized according to the level of offences they committed. The punishment could be, the killing of the offender's goat or fowl to make him bend to the law. Okodo (2009:264) affirms that "before the white man came to the Igbo land with his police culture, the Igbo people had a way of disciplining erring members of the public. They used masquerade then to arrest offenders and discipline them". In the village or community meetings they act as provosts and can whip people to ensure the maintenance of law and order. Ezenweke (2012:139) supports this idea when she states that the masquerade plays important roles in the "execution of peace, law and order in the communities. They can be called the police of the traditional Africa." From the above, it is clear that in the traditional Igbo society the masquerade helps to ensure that people are law abiding. In addition, masquerades help to build the traditional Igbo nation by maintenance of peace and order (Kanu, 2015:196). Peace and order are maintained through the enactment of law that guides people's behaviour. Although some of the laws made by the masquerade, being a secret institution is to serve the interest of their members, yet it is essential to the society. Amadi (2005:9) avers that one of the functions of secret society "Is to proscribe and enforce laws, especially, moral laws, within and outside the societies. Sometimes such laws are beneficial to the society as a whole; at other times they are devised for the convenience of their members." No matter the intentions of the laws proscribed by the masquerade, the most important thing is that they affect to a large extent the moral life of the members of the society, directly or indirectly.

The masquerade society also perform some political duties. In the past, masquerade guard the village against thieves, collect fines from people pronounced guilty of offences, and help in seeing that abominations are not hidden (Ilogu, 1974:16). The Omabe masquerade in Nsukka culture area in the Nsukka division, the masked dancer of the ruling cult, Omabe, was frequently resorted to by the *oha* when they had difficulty in enforcing an order. If it was found necessary to introduce the entity behind the mask into the house of a recalcitrant member of the community, the fine which the *ohas* eventually collected was been the case (Barnby, 1935:13, in Aniakor, 2012:314). Certainly, the institution of masquerade in Igbo traditional society harnesses the society through the enforcement of law and order.

Based on the above, Aniakor (2012:314) affirms that "Omabe, was in the past, a cross lineage and village cult association whose functions were socially oriented as an integral part of the Nsukka system of law and authority." The masquerade proclaim important laws

which have been dully considered and approved by the elders (Ogbalu, 2016:42). Obviously masquerade perform the functions that help to stabilize Igbo traditional society, the modern Igbo society may not boast that the system of masquerade is still the same. By the masquerade roles, they help a lot to keep sanity. It is sanity that enables everybody whether male or female, young or old, rich or poor, weak or strong, wise or foolish to participate in the activities of the Igbo life. It enables everyone to enjoy his life without anybody's attack and where evil doers attack people, they do not go unpunished. (Okodo 2009:259). On this note, Igbo (2012:144-145) declares that, in the past, masquerades were used in maintenance of some measures of laws and order. For example, if one committed a serious traditional offence such as uprooting a yam seedling of another person, one falling victim of a taboo subject, desecrating or dislodging a masquerade, and after various efforts to resolve and appease the gods, then the masquerade will be invited. Generally, in the past masquerades are used to collect levies and fines that a group of individuals have not been able to collect.

Agents of Justice

Justice means treating people equally. Justice is the quality of giving everyone his or her fair share. Justice does not thrive on favouritism but firmness and truthfulness in treating individuals. (Ogugua, 2003:14) asserts that, "Justice is more expansion than giving each one his due; for it entails balancing of man's relations with all realities in the universe." Generally masquerade is one of the means through which the traditional Igbo seek for justice. According to Isidienu (2020:66) "The role of masquerade in effecting justice in Igbo land cannot be relegated. It was one of the approaches that kept the traditional society at peace. They are agents of justice, harmony, law and order and moral uprightness." The masquerade serves as executive and the judge, the laws, decisions and judgement as it were, are through their agency imbued by divine power (Ogbalu, 2006:42). Since the Igbo believe that the masquerade is the spirit of their ancestors, every decisions made, is assumed to have come from the spirit world and are irrevocable. According to Ogbukagu (2012:153) masquerades are "dead relatives who come from the spirit world to entertain us as well as to maintain peace and order among the community." Based on the above, Kanu (2015:198) avers that because the Igbo believe that the masquerades are ancestors; "They were able to settle even the most difficult disputes. Their words were final because their words were believed to be absolutely impartial. They were the final court of appeal." On the Odo mask of Okpatu Area of Nsukka in Igbo land, Aniakor (2012:316-317) states that:

As supreme legislative authority, the Odo mask with the associated cult adjudicated in the land disputes and brought to trail persons accused of any criminal offence. It meted out punishment as it deemed fit in the past which in some might lead to the death of the offender. It could ban or proscribe any activities which is declared anti-social. It also enacted laws that governed village life and activities, including land regulations and use as well as social regulations guiding inter-personal and group behaviour and relations... The Odo mask with its associated cult exercised executive, legislative and

civil powers over the society, powers that went unchallenged until the advent of British administration. Although modern system of government has taken over the function of the Odo mask with the associated cult.

Generally speaking, masquerade in Igbo traditional society wield great power over the people. In most cases they act as the executive, legislative and judicial arm of the government. It is common knowledge in Arochukwu that a man would rather prefer to be tried in the law court when in trouble than face the judgement of the Ekpe mask. In the past it was the ultimate authority in all relating to political control and leadership both at executive, legislative and perhaps juridical levels (Aniakor, 2012: 317-318).

Corrective Measure

Every society wants her citizenry to be morally upright. Igbo people value high moral standard; they start from the onset to instill the right behaviour in their children. The masquerade is among the institutions through which the Igbo achieve high moral standard in the past. Masquerades are used to frighten children, instil good behaviour, conduct, obedience and truthfulness in them. *Ekwulekwu (onyekulie)*, the gossiping masquerade who has licence to say anything about all persons male or female, small or great, to say things usually bad done in secret, mentioning the doer by name. This helps people not to do a number of things, they would be ashamed of if made public (Ogbalu, 2016:42-43). From the foregoing, it is evident that masquerades perform a veritable role in the moral life of the Igbo in the past. Their disciplinary action also extend to misbehaved housewives especially those who cook late meals, those who maltreat their husbands and their mothers-in-law. Ezenweke (2012:138) was of the opinion that using masquerades to correct recalcitrant individuals has become obsolete. Despite the roles of the masquerade in different parts of Igbo land, Ezenweke's view is that the role of the masquerade is dwindling due to urbanization, civilization, increased educational insight and globalization in general. The above assertion is true, although it may not be possible for the Igbo to discard the masquerade institution, especially as it pertains to entertainment.

Instrument of Entertainment

The masquerade also plays an entertainment role in the society. During festivals, people that gathered are entertained by the masquerade group. Igbo (2012:144) states that "masquerades are used in socio-cultural entertainment of the people and visitors." Generally Igbo people value pleasure after working very hard. Different avenues of entertaining themselves are created during festivals and leisure periods. Some of the masquerades such as ulaga, agboghommuo, izaga, ijele, oji-onu among others entertain people with dances and songs which they spend a lot of time in learning, usually in secluded places (Ogbalu, 2006:41).

Definitely, everyone is allowed to watch masquerades when they are entertaining people, however, the females should not come close, rather watch the masquerade from a distance as mark of respect. Kanu (2015:196) avers that, “Masquerade cult provide an opportunity for recreation.”

Most of the Igbo activities are characterized by masquerading. Generally, they feature songs and dances that are in most cases, so exotic in nature. People usually gather on such occasion and were always overwhelmed with joy. Igbo (2012:146) acknowledges that, “The ulaga masquerade is for children and known as a folk singer and dance. It portrays a playful behaviour of children. Agboghommuo which was created from the beauty of the woman portrays the beauty of innocence.”

Summary of Findings

It was gathered that in the olden days, masquerades serve as the policemen of the community. They enforce discipline and order in the society. At town and village meetings, they performed roles of provost-marshals. They might whip in the course of enforcing law and order. For offences of different categories, they usually enforce penalties to offenders like killing of the victim’s fowls or goats to make the offender law abiding. Masquerades were feared and revered as the highest authority of the land especially when traditional heads were not easily seen. The activities of masquerades in the administration of the community during the pre-colonial period among others covered the areas of judiciary, settling inter-personal and group disputes and prescribing punishment for offences committed both against the land and society. They also have the authority to issue sanctions over any disputed property brought before them. Apart from entertainment and reformation of the community, masquerades also serve the purpose of maintain peace and order in the community. For instance, any property whether crop or land could be handed over to the masquerade society for protection against trespassing by tying it round with palm tendril (*omu-nkwu*). The palm tendril signifies the authority of masquerades. Any person who trespasses in these properties is liable to action of the masquerade, probably by the imposition of fines. In event of refusal to pay, the masquerade would be compelled to invade the persons’ residence in which case the culprit pays three folds. Further refusal to pay would attract the seizure of his livestock, which are auctioned, the amount of money owed by the debtors. Where the proceeds realized are more than the debt owed, the balance will be returned to debtors. The major leader of the masquerade cult who usually sits as the judge is known as *nne mmanwu* or *ogaranya mmanwu*.

It was observed that the enforcement of laws and order among the Igbo has been taken over by vigilance groups under town unions, police and other law enforcement agencies. People were of the opinion that in the past most people fear masquerades more than the police or

other law enforcement agencies. It was indicated that people are more law-abiding in the traditional Igbo society than in the present age. It was also gathered that it is no longer fashionable to use masquerades to police the affairs of communities because of western culture and western religion. It is obvious that the western religion affected drastically the progression of judicial roles of the masquerade institution in Igbo land.

It was observed that with the coming of the Europeans, the juridical role of the masquerade began to dwindle. The masquerades, no longer have an absolute control of the political institutions as before. Masquerades' control over the executive, legislative and judicial arms of Igbo traditional governance has been dominated by the modern judicial system.

Furthermore, it is very rare to see youths participating in masquerade society because of Western civilization. Parents and grand-parents persist in performing the rites for their sons, force their them to do so. Therefore most youths run away from taking part in the masquerade society, especially initiation rites, because of the teachings of Christianity which condemned the rites as idolatry. However recently, in most communities in the Igbo land the money used for the initiation (*ima-mmụọ*), were taken from those youths and the rite would be done in their absence. This is really an innovation because no one dared to do that in the pre-colonial society.

Conclusion

Masquerades perform a lot of functions in Igbo traditional society. They were regarded as sacred and highly revered. Masquerades play a lot of roles in the lives of the adolescents such that one starts to assume the role of manhood and strives to live an upright life. Masquerade rites when properly conducted are very helpful in inculcating sound and moral conducts in youths. The ceremonies of masquerade rites were wholesome in themselves since they were used in teaching the youths to respect God, parents, elders, and their future wives. The functions it performed in the society cannot be overlooked. As a law enforcement agency, it tries to bring peace and stability.

These ceremonies and rites were disappearing and things have started going wrong. Highway robbery, rape, adultery and abortion are becoming rampant. Christianity and western civilization had some good effects even on initiation into masquerade society. Before the advent of Christianity there were some practices in masquerade initiation rites that were not good but Christianity had transformed this through modernization.

Some masquerades are primarily for social reformation. In operation, the masquerade always speaks in a loud voice to expose and condemn crimes, misbehaviours and bad habits among some individuals of the community with a view to effecting changes. Women who

are bad cooks and those who have other bad habits are always at the mercy of the masquerade.

Apart from recreation, entertainment and social reformation, masquerading is a very effective way of sustaining peace and order, settlement of disputes, good government in Igbo traditional society. Masquerades also help in ensuring that things are moving orderly in the community. They also act as intelligent and vigilant agency against crimes, serve as witnesses in traditional courts, arbitrators, and prescribe and execute penalties due to offences committed by individuals or groups in the Igbo traditional society. Recently the roles of the masquerade in Igbo land has gradually been dominated by westernization, Christianity and globalization.

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