

## MASQUERADE IN NSUKKA CULTURE: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE

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**Abstract:** Nsukka as a people is a homogeneous cultural fact. A people that enjoy a geospatial continuum. Masquerade is an aspect of Nsukka culture. It is not particular with Nsukka as a people. It is equally in existence in other ethnic groups in Nigeria and Africa at large. The general belief in Nsukka as in other parts of Igbo land is that masquerades are ancestral spirits on a visit to mankind, with the awe it inspires as they enter the human village. It is believed that the mask transforms the actor not only physically but also spiritually and psychologically. The masker seems transmogrified once vested into the figure he is representing. The findings of this paper reveal among other things that, in recent times masquerade in Nsukka is no longer what it is ab initio, a means of entertainment, settlement of disputes, disciplinary measures, restoration of peace and collection of debts. Now, it is but, a poor shadow of its own reality. Some hooligans enter into this to rape women, kidnap, steal, flog, wound, maim and extort money from people indiscriminately. Masquerades in Nsukka have caused more harm than good. This work looks critically on the impact of masquerading and the future it holds for sustainability of peace in Nsukka cultural zone. The methodology used in this work is historic-descriptive as the Masquerade has been studied as a cultural fact with special interest on sustainability of peace

**Keywords:** Masquerade, Nsukka Culture, Implications, Sustainability, Peace.

### INTRODUCTION

Masquerade was in the ancient times a very interesting aspect of Nsukka culture. It appeared in different shapes, forms and sizes, with specified functions. Masquerades appeared during festivities and its seasons to add colour and glamour to events, occasions and celebrations.

In recent times masquerade in Nsukka has lost its significance and meaning. It was meant in the early years to reflect the inter-relationship and communion between the dead and the living. Masquerades were revered and respected because of the role they played in the society as the dead ancestors in relationship with their living progeny.

In the present moment, masquerades in Nsukka constitute a grave nuisance. They do whatever they want without qualms, with every impunity and at their will and caprice. This recent development has made masquerades objects of dereliction. Because of this destruction of its value by some miscreants, the essence of its establishment is now a façade in the cultural zone. This is due to the abuse of its significance by the uninitiated who mask themselves in them. This paper therefore addresses these excesses by masquerades and the implications for sustainable peace.

### GENERAL CONCEPT OF MASQUERADE AMONG THE IGBO

The mask often is a cover intended to conceal identity; this covering is mainly for the face and sometimes the rest of the body or some parts of it. This term according to Obodo (2006:3) should include:

The costumes and other immaterial factors such as behavior, dancing steps, songs and texts pertaining to the mask. Thus the concept of mask carries the ideas of concealment, disguise, stealth, disinformation, equivocalness, mental reservation.

In Igbo Masquerade the mask is different from an ordinary entertainment masking. For the Igbo, the masks have an added importance as a display – of supersensible realities. The mask points as an object of masquerading, the facelessness of the spirit. Among the subcultures in Igbo land the level of concealment varies. In Odo and Omabe the limbs of the masker are exposed whereas in the mmonwu masquerade tradition, the body is given full covering. To most traditions what is common is the concealment of the head and the face. The focal point and the vital center of power, magic and transformation is the head, whereas the face goes with the head. Igbo Masquerade cannot be limited to mere coverage or masking for purposes of impersonation or disguise sometimes it operates without mask as in the case of the “invisible masquerades”.

Invisible masquerades in Igboland are naked and are hidden from the initiates and women. In accidental cases however, when the masquerade is attacked and stripped bare, naked masquerades usually operate in the night when there is cover of darkness; consequently during masquerade seasons women were not allowed to go out in the night. During the beginning and the end of the masking season, generally known as the cult periods,

the naked masquerades may as well display in the day. They do this by re-locating to a secluded area within an enclosure or the uninitiated are forced to be indoors. This situation may last up to two or three days.

Igbo masquerading among other things celebrates foremost the return of the ancestors. It is therefore more than mere entertainment. It is ritual as well as dramatic in nature while the entertainment aspect goes on. The people equally look to it for protection, health, good harvest, correction, education and the blessings of children. It offers explanation to the role and affairs of the dead among the living. Above all these; is the mythical enactment of truths which brings to the fore the meaning of the peoples entire existence. Somehow, the opacity between the dead and the living, the age long conflict between life and death the chasm is closed up as the primacy and supremacy of life is commemorated in the rite of masquerade return. This brings to the fact that the dead were in actual sense not gone from the living.

It is believed however that the mask of Igbo masquerading transforms the actor not only physically but also spiritually and psychologically. The masker seems magically transformed once vested into the figure he is representing. There is a kind of possession inherent in some masquerades; sometimes the spirit of the masquerade controls and influences the masker in such a way that the spirit of the man is displaced and that of the masquerade take over him

Some of the rituals performed before the masquerade operates help naturally to induce possession. A Dibia or medicine man is naturally consulted for spiritual re-enforcement and divination before the masquerade performs. To this end Enekwe (1987:57) opines that:

Before performance, an animal that the particular spirit to be represented likes is usually identified by the Dibia and sacrificed, its blood is spilled on the mask to which magical objects and talismans are also attached. In some cases, a live cock is tied to the headpiece of the mask so that it dangles to death during the performance. This is intended to reinforce the power of the mask. When the masker has donned the mask, the Dibia sprays some magical potion on him saying some incantations.

Because of the link of the masquerade with the spirit world, the masquerade is therefore girded with enormous powers both magical and supernatural. These powers include among other things fore-knowledge, invulnerability, ubiquity and the ability to carry water with baskets that are porous. In the community, its influence, power and authority are enormous and strongly felt. It can compel and order people around without being questioned or confronted especially in relation to community labour, seizing of property and exerting fines by force. This strength and influence lies in the fact that it is the community that invested it with such powers and influence.

Igbo masquerade is rooted in secrecy; it is accessible only to the initiated. This is the reason why the missionaries saw it as a secret cult. The missionary interpretation here is not in the light of committing scandals and atrocities. To this end (Enekwe 1987:57) writes:

To divulge a masquerade secret is seen as an abomination and visited with dire consequences. The premium placed on secrecy is part of the explanation for the exclusion of women and children from participating in Igbo Masquerade... Perhaps, for the same reason of community secrets outsiders, (strangers) are usually excluded from participating in mask performances in the villages. The urban areas however, people from sundry cultures often belong to one masking society.

Masquerade cults membership is generally by initiation. This masquerade initiation consists of the candidate's introduction to the Masquerade secrets. This is normally done when the initiate is between six to twenty years old. One of the principal reasons behind this is: it is believed that a child or the youth at such an early age would be able to learn how to keep secrets of the cult from the uninitiated and women.

Igbo masquerade however, by excluding women is not anti-feminine. This is because some of the masquerades in their displays mingle with women, some other feature the female folk even though they are not masked or played by women. Apart from these, masquerade is owned by the community and participation in it is for all within the community. Buttressing this point Obiechina (1978:383) writes:

...children and women also find a role at some stage of the action. In some respects, whole clans are implicated in the various rhythms and movements of the action, household units also participate at some stages; the communion of the living and the dead takes in all the people, the destiny of the whole community, the interest of the whole people are pledged for protection.

In the return of the Odo masquerade some elderly women had the privilege of performing certain function for the Odo. These women as criteria must have reached menopause. At this point, they are considered no longer women in the strict sense of it because they are in their menopause.

The general reason for the exclusion of women from the masquerade cult is not unconnected with the fact that they are incapable of keeping secrets. Their role generally is restricted to the supply of services and food to men during the masking seasons.

## **MASQUARADE IN NSUKKA CULTURE**

### **The Omabe**

"Ma" is a term in Nsukka dialect that connotes spirit, ghost, deity or masquerade. "Ma" subsumes basically two categories that appear in different contexts when it refers to masquerade. These two contexts are bearing

different appellations and playing different roles. There are ekpe and Akatakpa. Ekpe has male and female dramatizing forms respectively. Akatakpa is made to appear grotesque and frightening whereas Ekpe is splendidly adorned. Perhaps the Akatakpa is made in this way in order to protect the Ekpe. According to Ugwu (2011:1).

The Akatakpa and Ekpe emerge during post burial ceremonies having come from the underworld to represent the ancestors, and to lead home the deceased who is only held to have been transformed and not necessarily dead. The other category which is our focus, is Omabe, it is the one for whose appearing very elaborate festivities and merriments are made. The forms under this are oriokpa, echaricha, edzi, ishima, etc

The Omabe which visits in the beginning of the month and remains in the host-community until the end of the year is hosted in turn by the communities involved. This right to host the Omabe goes round once in three years to each of the hosting community. The major distinction that should be established between Akatakpa and Ekpe; and Omabe on the other hand is that there is a celebration because the latter is appearing and in the former they appear because a celebration is taking place.

#### Mode of control

The Omabe masquerade and its activities are controlled by “the AtamaOmabe” and a group of individuals identified as “ndionyishi” or “ndi-oha”. These elders are to be on duty during this period of the masquerade outing to control the masquerade activities and to ensure that there is order and peace in the course of the festival of “Omabe”. Those who violate these laid down regulations and rules of the “Ndi oha” face the punishment(s) corresponding to the crime committed.

#### Omabe festival activities

Among the activities that take place during the Omabe festival; is first the Omabe “Igbabata ulo”. This is an awareness that is created among the people that Omabe will return from the spirit world. This creation of awareness to the return of Omabe is done twelve days before its return from the spirit world. Every family on the Eke market day will cook “Okpaaku ulo Omabe” (okpa meant for Omabe alone). This event usually takes place at night so that no child or woman will see them. In the event of this they make serious noise so that people will know that Omabe will return in the next twelve days.

“Eke Omabe” is the second event; this is the very day that Omabe returns from the spirit world. This return is sub-divided into two parts, namely; “Omabeututu” and “OmabeMgbede” (morning Omabe and evening Omabe). In Eha-Alumona, as described by Eze (2018:1).

The Omabe... comes down from “ElugwuEzemkpume” in the morning around seven to eight O’clock ... and this is done by only Omabeocha. They believe that any Omabeututu that falls[that time] will die. When Omabeututu comes down people give them different gifts asking them to make the year fruitful for them.

The Omabemgbede is more like merrymaking.

Many types of Omabe are now involved in this one and people come to Ahookweye (Afor market in Eha-Alumona) to watch them perform. Omabe that came out that time are Echaricha, Omabeocha, Omabeoji, Echaricha comes out to dance and entertain the people, Omabeocha or omabeoji accompanies it. Ediogbene comes out as father and it makes trouble. A rope is tied at its waist to control it so that it does not spoil things. Ahuolo and okokoro come out last and that will mark the end of the Eke omabe.

The people go home after this to eat and drink and to thank the “EzechitokeAbiama” (Almighty God) for the successful Eke Omabe. The third activity is itomabeaji (Releasing the belt of omabe). This comes up twelve days after Eke omabe. This is done only by “Ndioha” or “Ndiishi” (the eldest men representing the various villages). This is done equally in the night. The “okpaaku ulo omabe is prepared also that day for the omabe to eat. The omabe then is free to come out every Eke and Nkwo market days after this event. The final activity is the fourth known as onuokachi. This brings to the people’s consciousness that the omabe is about to return to the world of the spirit. Women and children are not allowed to go out on Eke onuokachi to avoid seeing what they the uninitiated were not supposed to see. Omabe shouts on top of their voices going round the whole village to make sure that he is not seen by women and children. After (onuokochi). The people bring out things that they intend to send to their ancestors through omabe.

After this comes the naked omabe or omabemboto as it is called. This comes twelve days before omabe returns to the land of the spirits. The women and children are not allowed to come out lest they see a naked omabe.

The general belief is that any woman or child that sees the omabeonuokachi or omabemboto will die. After this, the omabe returns to the land of the spirits.

#### The Odo Masquerade

The “odo” masquerade popularly known as Odomagana is sometimes called “Ekewo” especially in some towns within Igbo-Etiti area. The odo is simply known and identified as the spirit of the ancestors on a visit to mankind. The odo masquerade usually visits every two years. This visit of the odo and the subsequent return to the land of the ancestorsthe outing ceremonies, with the odo and the odo leaders is what is known and identified as the cult of odo.

The *odo* as a cult is worshipped by its adherents. It plays both cultural and religious roles. The people pray to *odo* for protection, favour and long life. On the initiation into the cult, Nwosu (2002: 1) is of the view that:

Among some Igbo traditional societies, secret societies play vital administrative roles. The commonest among them was the masquerade society known in some Igbo areas as “Nmanwu or mmuo”, *odo* generally is conceived as a communion. Membership usually was open to all the young men of fifteen and above. For one to be initiated, it involves some periods of tutelage. At the end, new members were often under oath not to reveal the secret of a masquerade society to non members.

The presence of the *Odo* is generally perceived as a communion since it is the oneness that exists between the ancestors and the living members of the community that is concretized in the visit of the *odo*. The *odo* cult connects the people to their ancestors. This spiritual connection is brought about by the admittance of every male child into the *odo* cult. The “Igbo *odo*” man at this early stage is already tied constantly and spiritually to the cult.

The *odo* as the spirit of the ancestors is believed to be the means through which the ancestors have an unbreakable covenant and exercise extensive jurisdiction over their human descendants.

#### **Functions of Masquerade in Nsukka**

Among Nsukka people masquerades play a lot of roles in relation to social control, peace and order. The adherents and the practitioners of African Traditional Religion accord great respect to them because they believe that they are spirits in corporeal form.

Masquerades were used in Nsukka in pre-technical era to foster law and order where it was becoming impossible. This is a clear indication of the effectiveness of masquerade in the application of rules and law enforcements. This goes a long way to show that the masquerade was more effective than the human element.

Masquerades were unchallenged as law enforcement agents. They summoned people for communal work and collected fines from deviants, they as well settled land disputes.

In the olden days, masquerades in Nsukka were used to punish children who committed atrocities like beating an elderly person or their parents. Some masquerades as well were used to terrorize women who cook habitually very late at night.

Masquerades in Nsukka was used in separating the weak from the strong, for instance, certain masquerades cannot be carried by weaklings because of the nature and great physical strength needed to perform it. By so doing, strength is encouraged and weakness shunned.

Spiritual powers were displayed by masquerades during their festival. The one with the greatest power was respected together with the kindred it represented. In this connection, Nwankwo (2015:5) writes:

It is through this means that the community comes to know the people with zenith powers of the forefathers. After the masquerade display, the one with the ultimate power brings honour to every member of his family when pronounced as winner.

In Nsukka masquerades were a very good means of entertainment. Some of the contemporary sweet music existent these days were adaptations from the music of the masquerade cult. Some of the sweet gospel songs as well were inculturated songs from the masquerade music. Masquerades play important roles in Nsukka ancient traditional ceremonies. These include, new yam festival, traditional burial rites. Their appearance gives colour and grandeur to the ceremony. Buttressing this fact Nwankwo (2015:6) writes:

In burial ceremonies and other kinds of celebration in Igbo land, masquerades are employed to lift the occasion beyond measures. Basically in most Igbo societies, every occasion, ceremony or festival where masquerade is not presented, the participants of the occasion do see the event as a mockery or inconclusive.

Another means through which the right of initiation into adulthood is performed in Nsukka is through initiation into the masquerade cult. When one is initiated into the masquerade cult, he automatically ceases to be a child, he now becomes an adult. Part of the initiation process is the ability to keep secrets. Grown up males who cannot keep secrets were often not initiated.

#### **Masquerade Menace in Nsukka**

To the people of Nsukka, this beautiful, aspect of their culture unfortunately has become a nightmare to the people. Today, the entire security apparatus operative in Nsukka together with the traditional leaders, church authorities and the leaders of thought are faced with the challenge posed by these masquerades and the possibility of curbing their excesses.

The brutality and barbarism associated or identified with masquerades in Nsukka has become a big source of worry. They molest people at will: visitors, native girls, women etc especially during their seasons and festivals. Many lives have been lost in the hands of these masquerades. Speaking on this Ikem (2019:1) maintain that:

Only recently, two catholic Priests were waylaid and beaten to stupor by daredevil masquerades in Ogbodu-Aba,... The two Priests... our reporter gathered, were attacked on the way to their respective duty posts... investigation revealed that the Priests were dragged out of their car by a group of masquerades and beaten like condemned criminals... the crowd that gathered as the show of shame continued couldn't even help matters, instead, they encouraged and hailed the masquerades to go on with the abominable and mischievous act.

In September, 2015 when there was upsurge of robbery in Nsukka urban. Masquerades were caught on several occasions snatching people's laptops, handsets and motorcycles in broad daylight. A pregnant woman was a victim in one of such robberies that took place in Ovoko. This attack resulted in the death of the woman and no punitive measure was taken to that effect. According to Ikem (2019:1).

...their activities ceased momentarily when the woman died; but few weeks later; they continued unleashing terror on the innocent citizens. A witness at the period said the woman was on her way to a maternity home when the masquerade stopped her and beat her mercilessly resulting in excess bleeding and her eventual death.

Regrettably, masquerades in Nsukka have taken a negative and inglorious shape. This is because; many people put on the masquerade to perpetrate evil such as rape and armed robbery. Stressing this fact Ozioko, (2015:1) wrote to say that:

Recently, the police in Nsukka arrested two men in masquerade costume in Ovoko community... for allegedly beating up a passenger on a commercial motorcycle and robbing him of N57,000.

According to the police, this incident occurred on the Nsukka/Obollo-Afor express road. An incident of rape also was reported from Opi. A nursing mother NgozikaUgwu was raped by a masquerade. This was her statement as recorded by Ozo (2012:1)

...the masquerade dragged me to a bush part, threw me on the ground fell on me. It held me on the neck to prevent me from shouting and blocked both my eyes and nose. At this stage, I nearly lost consciousness until one man came and rescued me from its grip.

Masquerades in Nsukka, over the years have become a thorn in the flesh for the visitors and inhabitants of Nsukka. This is because they force people to give them money. When this is not done, the person gets a thorough beating of his life. Buttressing this fact Uzodinma (2017:1) wrote to say that:

...their latest victim is the seminarian, identified as Lawrence Ezugwu, who is currently in critical condition following beatings and machet cuts he received from the masked men.

In 2001, thirty two (32) human heads were discovered at the Odo shrine at Neke. At the Ezukwu, shrine, the Christians of Neke made a startling discovery. They found 32 human skulls in one of the layers of the shrine. The shrine has seven layers, and the possibility exists that more human skulls are locked inside the layers. (Tempo 7. Marz 2002).

### **Implications for Sustainable Peace**

Peace has always been seen as the highest of the human value, according to Rummel (1975:1).

The most disadvantageous peace is better than the most just war. Peace is more important than all justice. I prefer the most unjust peace to the justest war that was ever waged. There never was a good war or a bad peace.

From this, one can see that the implications to this masquerade menace is obvious. The priests who for instance were beaten by the masquerades at Ogbodu -Aba, were Catholic Priests. This barbarism exhibited by the masquerades and their adherents will surely create a discord between the Catholic Church and the adherents of the African Traditional Religion in Ogbodu-Aba and this might last for a very long time. It will go a long way in destroying the peaceful co-existence between the traditional religionists and the Catholics in Ogbodu-Aba and the Catholic Diocese of Nsukka at large. Speaking on this Onah (2017:1 ) laments:

This is sacrilege and abomination and the church will ensure that all those involved are brought to book and as well fight to put an end to this evil culture.

The pregnant woman who was killed as a result of this barbarous act perpetuated by these masquerades, naturally a perpetual hostility between the two communities would be the outcome. Her community and her people would as much as possible to retaliate. The woman who was raped at Opi, a nursing mother by a masquerade, the inference can be drawn from this evil act of the masquerade. The husband of the woman, her relatives definitely will take some action against the masker either remotely, proximately, spiritually, physically or otherwise. In each case, there is an existing tension and lack of peaceful co-existence.

If these masquerade excesses are not curbed now, there shall come a time when they would become a terror group worse than the herdsmen terrorist group in Nigeria; especially in the way they steal, rape, maim and even kill people especially for ritual.

### **Recommendation**

1. People who are not initiated into the masquerade cult should not wear masquerade since they do not know the significance and content of what masquerade stands for.

2. Any village that owns a particular masquerade should have a means of identifying their masquerade. This could be done by numbering them or giving them specific mark so as to know when any of them defaults

3. The church authorities in Nsukka should look into the possibility of inculturating the masquerade cult by giving it a new Christian meaning and definition. By so doing this will help in sanitizing and curbing its excesses.

4. The modern trend today among Nsukka masquerades like the Akatakpa, Oriokpa and Ogede is the fact that many of them answer phone calls, snaps selfies with young girls and climb motorcycles while on mask. This is against the tradition and the general belief of the adherents of the African Traditional Religion that the

masquerade is their ancestors that came back to life. Any masquerade found going against this should be sanctioned.

5. Masquerades should not go to beer palour to remove their masque in front of women attendants to eat and to drink as has been the custom for many of them. Such masquerades if found should be punished.

6. The adherents of the African Traditional religion should go back to the status quo, whereby, people who are not initiated into the masquerade cult should not be allowed to put on masquerade. This approach will help greatly in sanitizing and curbing the excesses inherent therein

7. In Nsukka some masquerades pursue young women and girls; beat them mercilessly even when they had gone out of the road for them as custom demands. Any masquerades found doing this should be punishment commensurably by the competent authority.

8. Some young men put on the masquerade to target and punish girls who refused their sexual advances. Such people when proven guilty should be banned from putting on the masquerade and summarily dealt with.

### Conclusion

In Nsukka, one can see that the masquerade culture has to be reviewed and revisited. This will be in order for people to repose the trust and confidence they had in them in the past. Church authorities as well should try to inculturate it. This by implication means removing the fetish elements therein, purifying it and giving it a new Christian meaning and dimension. Thus by so doing, masquerade in Nsukka will regain its lost glory.

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