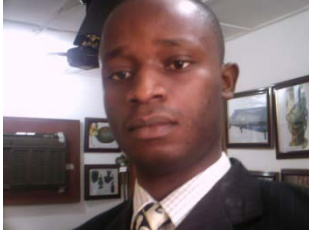


**ODINALA/Festival/Mmanwu
Masquerade Festival – MmemmeMmanwuNdiIgbo
By: MaazilfeanyiAtueyi, CIAC**



*“Up to now you’ve known masquerades to be mere symbolic manifestations of the ancestors or spirits. Men and boys dress up in elaborate cloth and raffia costumes and dance, jeer, or joke depending on who they are manifesting. Up to now, you’ve believed masquerades to be nothing more than myth, folklore and tradition. Now that you are a Leopard person, know that your world has just become more real. Creatures are real. Ghosts, witches, demons, shape-shifters, and masquerades, all real. Masquerades are always dangerous. They can kill, steal your soul, take your mind, take your past, rewrite your future, bring the end of the world even. As a free agent you will have nothing to do with the real thing, otherwise you face certain death. If you are smart you leave true masquerades up to those who know what to do with juju. “**Odinani: The Sacred Arts & Sciences of the Igbo People.**”*

The Origin of Igbo Masquerade

The above statements say it all. Masquerades in Igboland are known as *mmanwu*. Masquerading is a long standing custom in Igboland which dates back to the 13th century. It is one of the mystical elements among **NdiIgbo** and African religions. A masquerade represents a dead ancestor. Our legal system was built around this cult because the dead was supposed to be free from human faults like lying, stealing, injustice, etc. In the early days, the system worked quite well in maintaining morality and discipline in the society. The cult was so scary that land disputes which took tolls of human heads were amicably settled by them.

Various masquerades represent different imaginable characters in the land of humans. There are the terribly fearful ones and the ugly ones. Some carry charms which they use against enemies. There are the comic and beautiful ones which are not feared. But generally all entertain with songs, dances, and comic actions.

Initiation Into The Cult

The masquerade cult is shrouded in mysticism. In Igboland, a young man not initiated into the cult has not arrived. His masculinity is still in question. Before the advent of the whiteman and when customs and traditions were esteemed, young men were initiated into the cult between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. Over the early period of European incursion, young men who lived abroad went home at the ripe age for this all important ceremony, which usually took place after the planting season or

during the harvest. The initiated is proud and regards the uninitiated as 'Ogbodu' or the ignorant one, with no knowledge of what is within the mask.

One must be morally sound to survive initiation. The candidate must swear on oath never to reveal to the uninitiated the secret he would learn. He must have a sponsor from among the initiated, who would help him ease his suffering from the hands of masquerades who taunt, terrify and threaten him. For the initiation, the entrant provides the following items: Cowries (*oruukwu*), one big cock, seven gallons of wine, seven yams, and seven kolanuts. The ceremony may be for one person or a group, and starts immediately after supper on the appointed day. Cult members gather and the initiates follow at masquerade square (*nkolommuo*). The air is filled with singing, dancing and revelry but the initiate is agonizing over the awful stories he had heard about the torture and possible death that face him. Will he be cut into pieces and sewed together with the spider's web? Will the masquerades know that he refused to obey his parents?

When it is time – about midnight, the 'Ogbodus' one after the other file into the sanctuary of the masquerades where the secret is revealed. The masquerades use questions and tauntings to intimidate the new entrants who promise to be good citizens. In the sanctuary of fierce looking men, who are all the same harmless, the initiates are led into the secret of the masks and masquerades. They take the oath and thereafter become full members of the cult. Dancing and merriment continue till morning.

Today, this traditional initiation into the cult has been neglected as a result of western education and it would be difficult to resuscitate the culture. How can one be initiated into the cult at the age of sixteen when his curiosity has led him to the secret by the age of ten? He would have purchased and worn a mask in school or at home. Be that as it may, the Centre for Igbo Arts and Culture, (CIAC) believes that this aspect of our rich culture must not be allowed to die.

Masquerading, the influence of western education notwithstanding, is still and will continue to be an important feature of our culture, particularly during burial ceremonies, in festivals like *Afiaolu* and during other celebrations. Masquerades pull crowds at ceremonies, enliven occasions and give festivals their essence. Hence, people are drawn from far and near to watch the parade of different masquerades, representing different spirit worlds on earth.

The Role of Igbo Masquerades

Masks and masquerades are known in Igbo language as "*MmanwunaMmuo*" *Mmuo* are the spirits of the dead of a town. These spirits are either good or evil. The good are the spirits of *Ozo* titled men regarded as *Collective Royal Ancestors* called *NdiNdushi*, the great ancestors.

In the past, especially before the advent of Christianity, masquerades played the important role of keeping law and order. Children and young adults were scared of them; hence, one was bound to tell the truth at all times to avoid the wrath of masquerades. Masquerades were therefore regarded as a means of maintaining peace and social order. They were primarily used as unbiased law enforcement agents. Usually during festivals, the entire village is out for the ceremony of colorful and spectacular masquerades. While entertaining, they combine dancing, acrobatic displays and other extra-ordinary feats to awe spectators.

In the past, it was not unusual to witness tough masquerades walk up to individuals and berate them publicly for such abominable habits as coveting a friend's wife, poisoning someone or other criminal acts. As crude as this style of discipline may seem in present day and age, it was quite effective in instilling corrective measures to many deviants of the society. Thus, traditional norms and values of the community were preserved without sacred cows flouting their influence on the people.

Since masquerades were regarded as spirits, they were no respecter of individuals. All members of the society accorded them attention. With colonization and Christianity, however, the spiritual value of the masquerade has ebbed. As a result, they now serve mostly as an institution of cultural display principally for entertainment. The law and order aspect has atrophied as a thing of the past, and they are used nowadays more as instruments for tourist attractions presented in colorful regalia and accompanied by traditional music and choreographed dancers. Any wonder all sorts of indiscipline, robbery, kidnapping and other nefarious activities have taken firm root in *Ala-Igbo*.

Some masquerades come in the likeness of animals and birds. They thus move like whatever figure and form they are made to project. There is no known particular size or shape or even type that masquerades exhibit. Thus, in the Igbo entertainment circle, masquerade types and names vary according to the master's intentions, that is, masquerade names almost always have attached to them, the names of whatever shape and figure the masquerade assumes. For instance, *enyi mmonwu* (Elephant masquerade), *mmonwu Ugo* (Eagle masquerade), *mmonwu mbe* (tortoise masquerade) and others assume the appearance of the creatures they represent taking the appearance of an elephant (*enyi*), eagle (*ugo*) and tortoise (*mbe*), respectively. And during displays, they perform like the creatures and mimic the animals they represent. They pretend to sleep while not really sleeping; to lay eggs, and to scratch the floor or do other things peculiar to the various creatures they portray.

Some of the typical masquerades of Igboland are described below.



Atu

Ugo

Akum Masquerade from Igbakwu

Ijele

The Ijele masquerade, regarded as the King of all masquerades, originated in Anambra State. It is so popular that its fame is felt in every part of Igbo land. Hence, the Igbo proverb that says, “*ijele puta, umu obele mmonwu alaa*”, (when the Ijele appears, the small masquerades disappear), lends credence to this. The Ijele, most popular in Anambra, and to some extent, Enugu State, has the onerous role of entertaining people during occasions. Large and completely adorned, the masquerade is quite expensive. Consequently, any person or group inviting the Ijele to entertain must cough out substantial sums of money and provide several accompanying items.

Ijele is reputed to be the largest mask system ever to enter the history of world masking tradition. It comprises two segments: the upper and the lower sections separated at the centre by a big python. The upper segment is called *MkpuIjele*, the lower segment *AkpakwuruIjele* or *Ogbanibe* and the centre *Eke - Ogba* (Python). Towering 12ft to 15ft, the mask is an intricacy of multi-colored cloths, bamboo sticks and canes. Due to its heavy weight, a big outdoor house must be prepared wherever it is scheduled to perform. Some 100 men work over 6 months to prepare its costumes and house before an outing.

As the biggest masquerade in Sub Sahara Africa, the Ijele is considered a special heritage that belongs to the Igbo people and was listed in UNESCO Archives as intangible cultural element in need of urgent safe guarding. In many communities of Anambra, burial ceremonies and other special occasions celebrated during the dry season to evoke fertility and a bountiful harvest, feature the masquerade.



Ijele Masquerade in action

According to UNESCO's recent commentary, it is believed that a dance group called Akunechenyi from Umuleri and Aguleri communities living along the eastern tributaries of the River Niger in Anambra State gave rise to Ijele, which was originally intended to intimidate and scare away the early missionaries, as well as celebrate royalty and greatness in Igboland. Available oral story however indicates that the masquerade was a product of the Akwunechenyi dance group of Umudiana Village of IkengaUmueri. This group, which performed the first "*iziegwuIjele*" introduced Ijele to other communities; first to Umuatuolu Village of Umueri, then to IgboezunuAguleri, Nsugbe, NneyiUmueri, Nando, Awkuzu and other communities. IgboezunuAguleri extended the masquerade to IviteAguleri, Igbariamu, Nteje, and other villages outside Omabala areas.

In recognition of the role played by Umuleri in the origin of Ijele, the Old Anambra State Government unanimously selected UmueriIjele Cultural troupe to represent the State in the Festival of Arts and Culture known as **FESTAC** 1977 where the group won various awards and accolades for excellence from the Federal Government.

Ijele is considered a special masquerade and, as king, its performance is preceded, in the past, by 45 other accompanying masquerades. Nowadays, the 45 supporters are represented as 45 figurines over its top. As its myth and size depict every aspect of life, Ijele is the climax of all masquerades, and therefore performs alone usually at the end of celebrations. It is worthy of note that Ijele would not perform unless seven cannon gunshots are released together with the sound of royal music. In sum, Ijele is revered as the spiritual bond linking a range of communities in Anambra State; it is also recognized as a harbinger of peace, unity, dialogue and communality.

Akwunaechenyi

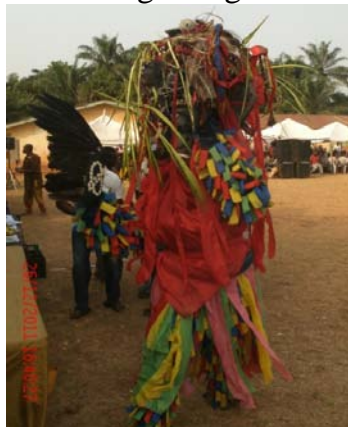
Akwunaechenyi is a complex and expensive masquerade like the Ijele, that assumes such similar appearance that a non-initiated can easily confuse them. Some people even say that Akwunaechenyi is the female specie of Ijele. Like the Ijele, the terms and condition for its performance depend on the bargaining skill of the prospective client and the Akwunaechenyi group. And like the Ijele and other masquerades, Akwunaechenyi performs during *ofalla*, condolence visits, burial ceremonies, outing ceremonies, and various festivities.



Akwunaechenyi

Mkpamkpanku

Mkpamkpanku is a very serious, fully masculine-featured masquerade. It is brisk, aggressive, agile and notorious in its own way. It has the appearance of a person and is so active that it must be restrained by two or more strong men via a rope tied to its waist. Again, before Mkpamkpanku performs, one seeking its services must go through hard bargaining with the masquerade group.



Mkpamkpanku

Okwomma

The Okwomma has similar features as the Mkpamkpanku. Its distinguishing feature is the fact that it always has a short matchet in hand. It uses this matchet to shake hands, collect money and greet people. Like the Mkpamkpanku, it is controlled with a strong rope tied to its waist.



Okwomma

Adamma

Adamma (beautiful maiden) is a female name in Igboland. Masquerade Adamma's beauty represents the Igbo woman and her beauty. Originating in Enugu State, Adamma is a member of a cultural group of men comprising instrumentalists, dancers, and masquerades which may be five or more in number. The group represents a family, and has a police guard, and in most cases, a nuisance fellow and palm wine tapper, all masked as men.



Adamma



DaughterThe Nuisance



Adamma kid



Adamma husband



Police guard

The masquerade is an innovation that has broken traditional masking, and the cultural group has spread over the entire Igboland. Most masquerades in Igboland represent spirits but Adamma foretells the maiden nuance and has no spiritual value like other masquerades.

Maiden-spirit performances in individual villages and clan areas are organized according to local tradition and the importation of new masquerading forms. Near Onitsha, west of Enugu, Adamma masquerades appear during festivals honoring ancestral daughters. Dance is the central feature of their performance although they may also enact brief narrative elements. North of Enugu in Aku, maiden spirits appear as clan-based masks during Odo ancestor festivals, and to the northeast, maiden-spirit masks appear in plays, as does Adamma.

Several Nigerian scholars have focused on Igbo masking as a form of indigenous theater. In some northern Igbo communities, masked plays are overseen not by the larger masquerade society but by volunteers, who create the play under the direction of a masquerade playwright and incorporate the improvisations of gifted members. Adamma is organized in a similar fashion.

By the late 1980s masquerades were appearing at festivals, wearing Adamma-like wigs, flashy mass-produced clothing, and make-up. Nearly a dozen groups in the early 1990s performed characters that seemed to be direct copies of Adamma. Two such troupes appeared in the 1993 Mmanwu Festival, and they were associated with particular villages. One of them had a sign that identified it as “The African Queen of Culture.” Adamma had already appeared in such secular contexts for several years, including graduation parties, and gospel concerts.

Odogwu

The Odogwu (dreaded spirit) masquerade is a youthful and aggressive character represented by a mask that insinuates “Bloodshot eyed rebel”. Its major attribute is demonstration of youthfulness with a specialty in intimidation. The Odogwu is also known for highly charged chanting that accompanies its rhythms.

Agaba

The Agaba masquerade is a character of a warrior represented in its name that literally connotes “*let’s go*”. Agaba’s major attribute is warrior-like prowess, which specializes, in ritual manifestations. The ease in the mobility of the Agaba instruments played with the Ogenes(gongs) only makes it a popular masquerade for the youths residing in major cities of Igboland. The chanting that accompanies the Agaba cut across ethnic dialects and cultures among the **NdiIgbo**.

Ojionu

The Ojionu masquerade is a water spirit character represented by a head-dress of crocodiles, sharks and other predatory water creatures. The major attribute of Ojionuis

creative non-stop dancing. Versions of the Ojionu masquerade vary from those that perform voices only and possess superior mystical powers to those that dance predominantly with minimal voices and less mystical powers.



Odogwu



Odogwu Anya mmeeOjionu



Agaba



Other Igbo masquerades and the role they play in Igboland will be featured in subsequent articles.

Masquerades Photo Splash



Omeka-aguAdaziNnukwu



Ajo-offiaNnewi



Izaga



Nwa-nsiNnewi