



Japan Bilingual Publishing Co.

Cultural Arts Research and Development

https://www.bilpub.com/Journal/Cultural_Arts_Research_and_Development_19.html

REVIEW

Social Dynamics and Resilience in the Northern Igbo Masking Traditions

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55121/card.v2i2.36>

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 29 June 2022; Revised: 8 August 2022; Accepted: 12 August 2022; Published: 22 August 2022

Keywords:

masquerade institutions; resilience; social dynamics; northern igbo masking tradition; liminality; pre-and post-european contact igbo society

ABSTRACT

In The coming of the Europeans into Igbo land engendered change-producing forces. Their encounter with the indigenous people created liminality that disrupted vital facets of Igbo traditional life. Masquerades that formed a significant aspect of the Igbo cultural heritage was hit the hardest by the colonial encounter but comparably changed the least. Participant observation method was used to collect information for this study. It identified a few of the change-producing forces and tried to understand the reasons for the resilience of the masquerade institution in the face of a barrage of the forces of the agencies of modern social change ranged against it. Their effects have been enormous but because the Igbo people have profound belief in masquerades as the spirits of their ancestors personified, and that the links and relationships between them need to be maintained and sustained, and the institution continues to thrive. More so, masquerade engages the services of different artisans at every stage of its production and performance.

1. Introduction

In the pre-European contact and pre-Christian Igbo society, masquerades had special place in the socio-cultural and religious life of the people^[1]. It symbolised the collective will and conscience of the community to which they belonged. Ontologically, the Igbo understand that man's existence on the earth is transitory and that one's spiritual body does not die with the physical body but continues to exist after physical death; hence, their implicit belief in the continuity of life hereafter. Thus, they believe that their deceased only transit to the spirit world to dwell among the pantheons of their ancestors and gods from where they keep watch over their living

progeny. This implies that the souls of the deceased do not lose full contact with the land of the living but are "in a continuous regenerative process", reborn as a newborn child after death "through a process of reincarnation" or returns to take a new life in a masquerade form^[2-4]. Therefore, to ensure continuity of life after death, the Igbo make adequate preparations for their dead for a hitch-free, smooth transition to continue with life in his new abode in the chthonic world. They re-enact relationship with their ancestors through elaborate mortuary activities and ancestral worship, which prepare the deceased for an unperturbed subsistence in the spirit world. They also use these and other various means, particularly masks and masquerading, to maintain and

sustain the primordial relationship between the physical and the spirit worlds. They personify and deify their ancestors in masked forms which they raise during festivals and ceremonies to re-enact the historical links between them. In the days of their forebears who existed in the pre-European contact era, the northern Igbo graced most of their ceremonies, feasts and festivals with masquerade performances. By so doing, they were always in constant physical contact and in continuous interaction with their departed ones.

The deification and personification of the Igbo ancestors in masquerades as incarnate spirits served as a strong link between the living and their ancestors, as well as humans and the gods. As a result, masks and masquerading have become inseparably part of the traditional Igbo society. They act as emissaries of the Igbo ancestors who come down from the spirit world to interact with the living progeny in their own world in the event of mundane activities^[5]. They are sacred drama of the Igbo people, which they use mainly to entertain, and to personify the Igbo cosmic myth that gives substance to Igbo worldview about the relationships between the living and the spirit world^[6]. Thus, they treat them with sublime deference and utmost respect and regard them as 'spirit manifest' and therefore hold them in high esteem^[7].

With the Igbo contact with the European civilisation, masquerade institution has lost most of its élan vital. Yet, it still remains highly resilient. In this study, therefore, effort has been made to spotlight a few modern elements introduced into the institution as a result of the contact with the European civilisation and to understand why it has survived, and retained much of its reverence and vitality amid a battery of acculturative forces ranged against it by the agencies of modern social change. In other words, it has tried to understand what sustains its credibility and efficacy in an era when Western civilisation is eroding African cultural values and practices. Participant observation method was used to collect information for the study from Aji, Umugagama, and Umugbo (Agbo and Ulo) communities of Enugu Ezike, Igbo-Eze North Local Government Area of Enugu State. I interacted with mask performers in different performance arenas, garnered field experiences, took notes and photographs, and obtained nonverbal responses in the form of gesticulation. 15 custodians of different masks, elders, and stakeholders in the masquerade institution were interviewed to elicit first-hand information. A few secondary sources-textbooks, journal articles, and internet resources-were also consulted to know the state of knowledge in the subject of the study.

In the course of the research, it was found out that despite the enormity of the effects of change-producing forces on the institution, it continues to thrive because of a number of reasons which include, among others:

1) masquerades are the incarnate spirits of the Igbo ancestors; therefore, they have the need to maintain and

sustain the historical links and primordial relationships between them.

2) The institution has irresistible cultural ingredients that sustain peoples' interests in its affairs and make it ever enduring in their hearts.

3) Masquerading in Igbo land is a creative act which its performance employs various arts, sciences, and technologies, and incorporates various forms of arts of the society to produce all-round theatre^[8].

Masquerading is a multi-faceted cultural enterprise that gainfully engages experts in different indigenous arts and craft areas: weaving, carving, dancing, and music, among others. These cultural attributes of the institution have been identified as part of the reasons for its resilience in the face of the change-producing forces such as the social control agencies of the modern government and Christianity.

2. Colonial Encounter and Igbo Masking Tradition

When the Europeans came to the Igbo land, they met traditional systems that they were not familiar with their workings, for instance, masquerades and their activities. These were one of the major puzzles that confronted them. They did not comprehend its underlying principles vis-à-vis Igbo ways of life. Therefore, they could not fathom why the Igbo regarded masquerades as spirits and treated them with unreserved respect. Before they came, Igbo masquerades enjoyed unequalled respect from the people. It may not be far from the fact that their ignorance is as a result of the marked differences in the concepts of masquerades between African and Western cultures. To the Igbo, masquerades are not a phantasy or plaything but a metaphysical reality, incarnate spirits of their ancestors which they hold in a very high esteem. Among them, masquerades have some spiritual connotations. On the contrary, masquerade in the Western culture simply means mere wearing of a disguising costume in an informal gathering of friends, for instance, at a party. Therefore, based on the conceptual differences, the Europeans never saw Igbo masquerades as a thing that deserves such deferential regard. Therefore, the awesome powers of the Igbo masquerades meant nothing to them. This attitudinal indifference of the European missionaries and government officials towards the masquerade institution demeaned and devalued them; hence, the robust reverence they enjoyed began to wane.

However, it was not long after they arrived that they began to realise that part of the reasons why the masquerades wielded and exercised such august authority among the Igbo and they were accorded such reverence was because they were "cults of outstanding importance"^[9]. They realised that the masquerades were inalienable part of the Igbo life that must be handled with utmost caution to avoid unnecessary qualms between the

traditional and modern systems of social control. Therefore, masquerade institution was allowed to continue, in principle, as a traditional instrument of social control “so long as it did not plot to oppose the controlling power of the colonial administration, and so long as it did not perpetrate behaviour norms gravely repugnant to those recognised for “civilized society”^[10]. Furthermore, Redfield^[11] in Onyeneke^[12] proposed that for both systems to amicably co-exist and operate without skirmishes, the masquerade institution would continue to be in force with little challenge to change. Its system of secret initiation through strong ordeals, the strong pattern of exclusion of women, children and uninitiated, the ability of the masquerade to execute unwanted citizens, its position above the law etc. would very much remain in full force.

However, the censored freedom of the masquerade institution left it in a liminal space where they operated between and in-between a dual system. The authority of the masquerades has been reduced to subservience and made to yield to the authority of the British colonial administration in a case where there was a clash of interest. Through that means, they were able to subjugate and subject traditional institutions to the authority of British colonial administration, a clear indication that they were not comfortable with the influence and authority of the masquerades as they met them. Obviously, it indicates that they had fears that if the authority and influence of the masquerade institution were left in the vigour that they met them, they may be impedimental to the attainment of their goals of proselytisation and colonisation. They, therefore, began to contrive, and engage in, several missionary activities and other modern social devices that they used to downplay, impoverish, and subvert Igbo cultural values to their advantage.

Mission-schools were a significant instrument that they employed to aid them to accomplish their goals. The Christian missionaries established the village schools where they trained Igbo people, particularly the adolescents. Most of them were half-educated, and incorrigibly indoctrinated. Schools were a vitalising force used by the missionaries to brainwash and colonise the mentality of the youths. In the schools, they were not only taught the three Rs (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic) that prepared them on how best to serve the European interest in their business firms and administration but were also catechised to prepare them for the evangelical work of spreading the gospel of the European God.

Thus, most of them who acquired the education got converted to the Christian faith and became overzealous converts who began to see themselves as high and above every other person. Their conversion to the new faith was facile since, at their age, most of them had not yet initiated into any traditional cult groups. Initiation stratifies the Igbo society into social ranks and inculcates

certain cultural values and patterns of behaviour in the young men who pass through its rigorous processes. To initiate into a masquerade cult confers on the initiate the status of manhood. Therefore, because they had not been schooled in the traditional beliefs and customs, they could not understand the cultural implications of their deviant acts. Consequently, they became ready agents of destruction against time-honoured Igbo indigenous customs and practices in the hands of the Christian missionaries and cultural imperialists. They began to see the rich Igbo cultural values as obscene practices not worthy of existence. They became more destructive to the traditional customs and practices than were their ‘white’ masters. They condemned and destroyed, in words and actions, indigenous works of arts, principally sculptures and masks, as well as the shrines and temples that housed those objects. They conjured up all manner of pejorative terms to devalue Igbo values, displaced and supplanted them with European values and practices that were incongruous to the indigenous values. As a result, the respect the Igbo had for their value systems began to wane significantly.

Consequent upon the Igbo encounter with the Western civilisation, most Igbo communities tended towards urbanisation with uncontrollable rapidity. Urbanism engenders urban-rural migration which fosters changes in the patterns of life of a people. It brings about forces of modern social change. It is characterised by plurality of worldview and religious belief systems, as well as different modern institutions of social control that are not in agreement with the Igbo cultural practices. Before the encounter, they lived unadulterated and untainted rural life, and the authority of masquerades was unassailable and unquestionable. Migration of Igbo youths who are the driving force of masquerade activities (eghal bu ike ma) to the urban areas in search of white-collar and blue-collar jobs has largely rocked the base of the masquerade institution. They embrace and imbibe European cultural values with reckless abandon, to the detriment of the indigenous cultural values. As a result, European values are gradually challenging the necessity that sustained the credibility and efficacy of the Igbo masquerade institution.

In the days of the Igbo forebears, it was outrageous to call to question the judicial or executive activities of masquerades by any mortal or human court or to mention the name of a masker or make any direct statement about his identity even if one knew whom that was. All the contrivances of secrecy were to imbue the masquerade institution with the qualities that would increase its awe, credibility, vitality, and reverence. The custodians of the Igbo masking traditions designed these highly creative secrets, “guarded with taboos, protected with sanctions and nurtured with rituals”, to make the cherished masquerade institution awe-inspiring and to conserve its cultural verve^[12]. Secrecy enhances its awe and aura, and boosts the mystery of its being as a spirit and as an inscrutable, paranormal phenomenon.

Christianity is another Western change-producing force that has largely caused the masquerade institution to lose its *élan vital*. Its incursion has immensely weakened the vivacity; debased, demeaned and demystified the masquerade institution. Before the intrusion of Christianity into the cultural life of the people, they perceived masquerades as, and believed that they were, unassailable incarnate spirits of the Igbo ancestors who appear as masked spirits from the chthonic world to mingle with their descendants in the world of the living. They regarded masquerades highly as an inscrutable spirit from the underworld. Its spiritual essence is such that no mortal could openly challenge its authority; such attitude was a taboo, *nsọ al*, a desecration of the creative secrecy of the masquerade institution.

In all Igbo world, such acts incurred the wrath of the elders and masquerade groups whose duty it was to manage the masquerade institution. They viewed such acts gravely and usually visited the culprits with very serious sanctions such as heavy payment of reparation, wanton destruction of property, ostracism, and even outright killing, depending on the nature and magnitude of the act. Nowadays, people no longer hold masquerades in such high esteem but could act against it as they willed. The Igbo people especially the youths who have embraced the new Christian religion and imbibed its tenets now challenge and even fight masked spirits openly. With reckless disregard for the established Igbo traditions, indigenous clergies, especially the self-styled 'men of god', announce the names of maskers in their churches in the hearing of the mixed population of the congregants. This happens more often if a member or members of their congregation were involved in the sanctimonious act of confrontation with a masked spirit and its eventual desecration.

In the pre-Christian Igbo world, women were ordinarily not part of masquerading generally. Masquerade activities were considered a male domain not to be ventured into by the womenfolk. Therefore, they ought to show undisguised respect to masquerades in several ways. For instance, custom demands that they maintain a reasonable distance at the sight of an approaching masquerade. It was sacrilegious for women to dare masked spirits by not doing so or at least turn away in deference from an on-coming masked spirits. Presently, contemporary women, especially the self-righteous Christian women, no longer observe these cultural observances but almost brush shoulders with masked spirits on their way as a show of their piety in the Christian faith. As if their defiance is not enough violation, churchwomen groups willfully organise church activities on the days that were declared seclusion days. (Seclusion days were the heyday of masquerade activities when women and non-initiates were not to venture out of their homes until after a stipulated period.)

Susan Obaje, a Christian mother (personal communication, 23/4/2021), responding to a query as to why it has become so, retorted, "to restrict people's

movement because of masquerade activities is savagery in the contemporary world. It is tantamount to denying women their freedom of movement and of worship". At Ekwulobia, a town in An-ambra State, there was a case of a woman who hit an *achik-wu* masquerade with a stick in retaliation of its challenge because the woman dared the masquerade by not maintaining a reasonable distance or at least turning away in deference^[10]. She was heavily fined by the elders because she desecrated the masquerade institution and defiled the land.

Such audacious and maleficent acts of women have bred unhealthy disputes between the church and the villagers that in most cases resulted in wanton destruction of lives and properties in Igbo communities. Festus Ndu narrated how his family lost all their belongings to the irate youths (initiates of masquerade cults) of their Obuofu Nenwe community in Aninri Local Government Area of Enugu State because of his mother's involvement in one such sanctimonious act of desecration (personal communication, 12/9/1991). In Ovoko, Igbo-Eze South Local Government Area, the Catholic faithful organised a rosary procession on a day the town was celebrating their New Yam Festival which usually culminates in flamboyant masquerade displays and performances. It was considered an affront on the culture of the people; hence, masquerades disrupted and dispersed the procession. The Reverend Father in charge of the Parish in the town raised masquerades in the parish house (an aberration!) as a reprisal, to avenge the actions of the masquerades. He considered the act a molestation of his parishioners and a disruption of a lawful religious activity. The masquerades of the Catholic parish in company of the Reverend Father went from house to house in search of the presumed perpetrators of the act of the masquerades. Prompt intervention of the community elders saved the town from the mayhem into which the action of the priest would have plunged it.

In the pre-Christian era, the Igbo considered it a patriotic act of no mean feat for one to offer oneself to animate masquerades for one's community. They regarded it as one of the highest demonstrations of patriotism or show of nationalistic spirit. Arumona Eze stated that as the property and common conscience of the community, only men of great courage and talent could be chosen by the elders or masquerade groups to animate masks for the community because their successful performances brought fame and honour not to the animator but to the entire community or the masquerade group that raised it (personal communication, 02/04/2021).

Ekọ Dike asserted that because masquerade is the property and common conscience of the village or the group that raised it and that it is the traditional authority personified and concretised for practical purposes in the maintenance of law and order in the society, the entire community usually threw its weight behind it regarding

successful outing and safety. Any person who feels injured by the action of a masked spirit does not challenge the masked spirit but could seek redress afterwards from the elders of the community or the group that raised it (personal communication, 26/03/2022).

In the contemporary Igbo society, people no longer see masked spirits in that light. The will to see masquerade as the property and common conscience of the village has diminished. Villagers no longer see it as a collective responsibility to protect masked spirits from onslaughts. People now suffer individually for actions taken by masked spirits. Therefore, people with such patriotic instincts no longer have the passion to offer themselves for animation. More so, they are described with pejorative terms as *adla* (imbeciles) and their acts ridiculed with such statements as *adla be a na-eyi maa* (only imbeciles offer themselves as animators of masquerades). These negative remarks about masquerading and other forms of negative tendencies orchestrated by those who no longer see anything good in Igbo customs and practices towards such people has dampened their spirits and caused masking tradition to obsolesce in Igbo society. People hardly offer themselves to animate masks these days because they no longer see it as dignifying. The advent of the new religion with its attendant proselytisation of the Igbo societies has downplayed the pre-eminent position and the sacred roles masquerades played in the pre-European contact Igbo societies.

However, in spite of all the acculturative forces ranged against the institution in many Igbo societies since the wee years of the European incursion, it continues to thrive. Seemingly, of all the Igbo cultural practices, it was the worst hit by the colonial encounter, yet, it has retained its vitality the most and of the many aspects of Igbo culture, it shows more evidence of cultural lag. It has alluring and irresistible cultural ingredients that endear it to people's hearts. For instance, masquerading is a meeting point of several Igbo artistic enterprises such as architecture, theatre, drama, music and dance, minstrelsy, as well as the embodiments of the people's ideals and mythologies^[5]. Its re-creative performance activities such as dancing, acrobatics, singing as well as other mysterious demonstrations attributed to certain masquerades also constitute interesting and appreciative aspects that make it adorable^[6].

It makes use of the totality of all arts available to a particular environment as its raw materials and employs mimicry, lampoon, and satire with which it dissuades people from indulging in aberrant, evil behaviours, in order to stimulate social conscience and to promote social virtue^[13,14]s. The masquerade institution embodies a conundrum of paranormal technology that stimulates critical reasoning in humans. Some masquerades perform certain mysterious feats that are beyond human comprehension and therefore difficult to explain, for

example, some masquerades unleash flies or bees against a rival, bi-locate, emit smoke, elongate and shorten, and appears and disappears mysteriously^[10,12,3]. This aspect of masquerade display attracts the greatest criticisms and condemnation of the new converts to the Christian faith as employing charms that are inconsistent with their new faith.

However, it is intriguing to note that despite all the alluring features of the masquerade institution, Igbo people impetuously embraced the European value systems and abandoned the rich Igbo tangible and intangible cultural heritages without a second thought as to the consequences their action might have on the cultural values. They were quick at losing sense of cultural relativism and developing a cultural cringe about African cultural values and practices. They hastily jettisoned their cultural values as inferior to the European values without regards for the fact that every culture is as unique as the other. As a result, Europe- an cultural values and aesthetics overwhelmed Igbotraditional religious and belief systems and cultural values and, in a swift,displaced and replaced them. No opportunity was allowed for transition from the existent Igbo cultural values to the newly imported ones.

Nonetheless, in the recent past, there seems to be a realisation of the mistakes of the forebears as there is a resurgence of interest in Igbo cultural values and practices. Lately, the contemporary Igbo man seems to have realised that not all of these were as condemnable as the Europe- ans made them to seem. Therefore, today's Igbo elite, including the clerics, educated according to the Western parameter and religious belief systems have taken proactive steps to disabuse the minds of the people already suffused with wrong information about themselves. They may have been prompted into this realisation by Ijomah's postulation that it was only Africans who could vividly present to the African the truth of his existence^[15]. They have, therefore, formed alliances of different forms to constitute the vanguard of reversing the negative attitude developed against Igbo cultural practices and belief systems, including the masquerade institution.

Hitherto, these people despised the masquerade institution and its activities as not being befitting for their new statuses because they have acquired Western education and have been fed with false information about their existence and cultural practices. Many even rejected their vernacular names for the names they were given at Christian baptism. In the current wave of cultural renaissance, this same people have taken up the gauntlet to re-educate the people on the need to embrace people's traditional be- lief systems and cultural practices. As a result, beginning from a few decades in the past, there has been a boost in Igbo cultural activism; cultural activists and intellectual elite have committed themselves to Igbo cultural renaissance. They have engaged in aggressive campaign against perceived cultural injustice

and enslavement and in resuscitating the dying memory of the masquerade institution through organisation of cultural activities. Many scholars of Igbo cultural studies have seen the need to reappraise the Igbo masquerade institution, correct, through insightful writings, the people's wrong impression of the institution and redirect them on the right cultural path^[10.12.13.16-18]. Their actions have given impetus to impressive resurgence of interest in Igbo masks and masquerading as well as other forms of Igbo cultural practices.

For instance, as part of their strategies for actualising their goal, the intellectual elite develop cultural centres in Igbo city centres. In these centres, they organise seminars, conferences and symposia to discuss issues of cultural concerns^[19]. They also develop these cultural centres in rural areas to encourage the growth of community spirit and consciousness in all aspects of Igbo cultural life^[20]. Government agencies also organise cultural activities aimed at promoting Igbo cultural values. For example, in November 1986, the Enugu State Ministry of Information and Culture initiated a new phase of cultural renaissance; it organised the first Mmanwu Festival, the first of its kind east of the Niger and indeed Africa. Over 1,800 masquerades, both from within and outside the State, participated in the maiden cultural event. It was a huge success and has contributed immensely in reawakening peoples' interest and consciousness in masquerade activities in Nigeria. Following that example, many cultural groupings and communities today organise cultural activities aimed at reviving their cultural values. In the relatively recent time in Nigeria, cultural festivals that involve masqueradedisplays are developing into an excellent tourism business.

In the pre-European contact days when the forebears of the northern Igbo had not had contact with the Europeans, their concepts of arts including masks and masquerading were based on their ideologies and mythologies. Their masks and masquerades were mainly conceptualised as the idealised re-presentations and interpretations of nature or of their ideas and ideals, in plastic form. They usually presented them in anthropomorphic, zoomorphic or anthropozoomorphic forms. However, because art is a reflection of artist's immediate environment and experiences, Igbo art was not stagnant but followed the trend. Their encounter with the Western civilisation was a change-producing influence on conceptualisation of art forms. The masquerade in Figure 1 is an example of such conceptualisation based on European influence. Morphologically, it stands out from the rest of the masquerades that displayed in the three communities with regards to its mask, costume and physical appearance. It is robed in a factory-made sparkling white vestment which contrasts with most *Qmabẹ* masquerades of the northern Igbo that are costumed in age-worn, milk-coloured and drab locally-woven white clothes.



Figure 1. *Mboma n g* (Let me gist you) masquerade. Aji Enugu Ezike.

Source: OdojaAsogwa, March 23, 2022

The northern Igbo belonged to the pre-clothe-wearing African societies that made use of hides, leaves, tree barks, and animal feathers to cover their nakedness and to protect themselves from harsh weather conditions and insect bites before the invention of cloths. The history of masquerading in Igbo land is as old as mankind; it antedates clothe-wearing. Consequently, they also made elaborate use of these materials for masquerade costumes. Animal skins are used for such masquerades as *Eji Ogbene Iyanyi* (Figure 2); leaves for *Qbianwjiishi* (Figure 3); and animal feathers for *Ezenwudele* (Figure 4). When the art of cloth-weaving was invented, they began to use locally-woven cloths for both domestic and ritual purposes. They usually got their supplies from *Nsukka* indigenous weavers as well as from their *Idoma* and *Tiv* (both of *Benue State*) neighbours.

Some northern Igbo communities, for example, *Akụ* *Dięwa*, *IbagwaAni*, and *EdemAni*, were notable for their adroitness in traditional cloth-weaving in those days. They produced various types of traditional cloths for domestic and ritual uses. Cloths produced for ritual purposes included, among others, *Oskchi*, *akparnogwere*, *qberebere* and *ugere*. However, with the introduction of English factory-made cloths (*ekwā ęru*) to the area by the *Arq* cloth merchants, the popularity of the traditional locally-woven cloths dwindled. Its introduction has brought a significant change in the traditional dress modes of the people as well as in the masquerade costumes.



Figure 2. *Eji Ogbenelyanyi.*

Eji ogbene iyianyi (Figure 2) is also known as *Eji ẹshushua* (hyena). Its costume is constructed with the skins of hyena. It is a highly exuberant and violent brand of Qmabẹ. Because of its violent disposition, it usually does not move alone but always with another masquerade to restrain it from inflicting injury on spectators. A strong rope was usually tied around its waste with which it is restrained.



Figure 3. *Qbjanwishi.*



Figure 4. *Ezenwudele.*

Traditionally, the costume of the masquerade called *Ezenwudele* was made of vulture feathers (*ẹbuba udele*). *Udele* in the cosmology of the people is regarded as an emissary of the gods. It is a sacred bird and therefore a sacrilege for one to intentionally harm or kill it in the culture area. If *udele* was not to be seen around where offerings were made to the ancestors or the gods, it is ominous. It was a sign that the gods did not accept the offerings.

Aside from the change from the locally-woven cloths to English factory-made cloths, other clothing accessories not previously used as part of masquerade costumes infiltrated the masquerade institution. For instance, shoes, canvases, stockings, hand gloves and lots more are now commonplace aspects of masquerade costumes. Majority of the Qmabẹ masquerades on display in the three communities wore these accessories. It is only a very few sacred masquerades, for instance, *Egbe ocheal* (Figure 5) that still retains the traditional clothing items as their costumes. In the ontology of the people, such masquerades could only retain their spiritual essence and mystical powers if they are costumed in such traditional clothes. Some of the traditional costumes have been imbued with metaphysical properties that make them very powerful and indestructible. The metaphysical properties also make them indestructible by fire or other natural elements such as termites. Stories have been told of unsuccessful attempts to set masks and costumes of such sacred masquerades ablaze.



Figure 5. *Egbe ocheal* masquerade.

Egbe oche al (the hawk that keeps watch over the land) is also known as and called *Ishi maa* (the head of all masquerades) or *maa ogerenyi* (elderly masquerade). Ugwuanyi Urama Idoko described it as “one of the most powerful Omabę masquerades in the northern Igbo land”. He elucidated this claim by narrating how on one occasion the police officers attempted to arrest the masquerade.

They(the police)came, other masquerades disappeared from the scene but *Egbe ocheal* did not budge. They ordered it to enter their Hilux van. It did not resist them but calmly entered the van. However, when it proved its mettle was when the police wanted to take him away in the van. Every effort made to start the engine proved abortive. When they were told that with the masquerade in the van that the engine would never start, they ordered it to come down from the vehicle but it refused to. The police officers were advised not to apply force if they ever wanted to leave the scene in their vehicle. They consulted with the escorts of the masquerade who told them what items to procure to appease its spirit for it to come down without which, it would not be possible for them to leave the scene in their van. When they realised that they had no option than to comply, they did and the masquerade alighted from the van. As soon as that happened, the engine started and they left (personal communication, 23/03/2022).

The name of the masquerade differs from community to community in the culture area but its functions remain the same in any community they were found. As its name (the hawk that keeps watch over the land) implies, its primary function is to secure the land. It is its responsibility to perform the annual ritual of community cleansing. To perform this function, it brings to bear the force and power of the supernatural beings “upon such problems as curing disease and ridding a community of incipient illnesses and/or lurking malevolent spirits” [21]. Whenever it appears in public, it signifies that something ominous is lurking. It supplies its own music with a small twin metal gong (*ogene mkpinabọ*).

Egbe oche al is one of the traditional masquerades that has remained resilient in the face of change-producing forces. It still appears in its traditional costume, no stockings and no shoes nor canvas. Its headdress is a superstructure of wooden sculptures. On the headdress are attached panels of applied cloths that cover the head up to the chest region. Its face is indicated by two inverted triangles representing the eyes. The rest of the costume is decoratively applied cloth. The trousers are slightly below the knee and expose the rest of the legs.

The organisation of masquerades in the pre-European contact Igbo societies was the sole responsibility of the elders and stakeholders in the masquerade institution. One has to be an initiate to be involved in its organisation and display. As a result of social dynamics, the status quo has been altered. Government agencies and other secular associations (some of which may have women as members) organise and raise masquerades indiscriminately at their whims and caprices without regards for cultural norms that regulate the rules of engagement.

In those days, masquerades were normally raised in designated places specially prepared and reserved for that purpose, out of the sight of women, non-initiates and children. This category of people is not meant to have knowledge of what is behind the mask. Eze Nwa Ugwu Agbędọ informed that in those days, animation of masks was kept so secret that a person who has been nominated by his village or a masquerade group to animate a mask ‘travels’ out of the village for about two or three days to the day of the appearance of the masquerade he was to animate. That is a prank on the uninitiated, women and children. The absence of the man among his group or peers on the performance arena would not be readily interpreted as that he was the man behind the mask. This enhances the mystery of mask animation. Uninitiated are made to believe that masquerades appear from the ant holes. Secrecy increases the awe and mystery of the masquerade institution (personal communication, 23/03/2022).

Today, it is no longer a news to hear that masquerades are raised in the animators’ homes where women move about freely. Consequent upon this, women no longer feign ignorance of the knowledge of the identity of a masker. They move very close to maskers to take snap- shots of their pre-animation gestures. In the days of the forefathers of the Nsukka Igbo, such act was unheard-of and would be considered a cultural cataclysm.

More appalling is the fact that women are today allowed access to the secret information of the masquerade institution for different reasons including academic research. Hitherto, such secret information was only accessible to the initiates and never divulged to uninitiated males much less women. This category of people is, in the masquerade phraseology, referred to as

'strangers'. I recall when in the early 1970s a black American lady who enrolled for a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programme in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka intended to research on the Ekpe masks of the Igbo but was advised to drop the idea because she was not going to be allowed access to the information she might need for the research. Strangers, more especially women, are not allowed access to such secret information. Today, the narrative has changed completely; every information anyone may require about the masquerade institution is readily accessible in the public domain.

3. Igbo Masquerade in the Architecture of Social Control Engineering

For humans to co-exist in harmony, there must be substantive system of maintaining ordered social relations among the various component entities of the social grouping. Therefore, to ensure peaceful co-existence, certain norms and sanctions must be put in place to control and maintain individual and sectional behaviours and actions within a social grouping. Masquerades were a major effective instrument of social control in the pre-European contact Igbo. They were the "visible embodiment of the community will for implementing its social order"; the watchdogs and the policing agents of the society^[10]. In this role of maintaining social order, they were supported by other minor human structures in the security architecture.

In the present day Igbo society, the British colonial administration has divested the masquerades of most of these roles and given to the modern agents of social control. For instance, their roles as traditional policing agents has been taken over by the modern police. These roles, according to Onuora Nzekwu, were comparably better and more effective than in the hands of the modern police^[16]. The communities were then better secured under the masquerades, which implies that the communities had relatively better arrangement to maintain law and order in the pre-British Nigeria than what obtains in the post-British era. The traditional security apparatuses were more persuasive, and applied psychology and fear inducements in ensuring compliance by the indigenous people and eliciting information from offenders.

Following from these antecedents, it would be worthwhile for modern security apparatuses to explore the potentials of the mystical technology of the Igbo masquerade institution if they desire to build any sustainable security architecture in the modern Igbo society. Today, rather than build on traditional security architecture, the august authority of the masquerades has been weakened to the extent that the services of modern security agencies are engaged during masquerade displays to control the actions of both humans and masked spirits, a role previously played by the youthful athletic masquerades.

In those days when the traditional Igbo society was well-organised and cohesive, masquerades had supreme, unassailable authority over the humans. Though they had such supreme authority, it did not however give them express license to operate without checks; the village community concerned regulated and enforced its rights and obligations as well as stipulated its rules of action. Both the masked spirits and the spectators were guided by the rules which its violation attracted heavy sanctions, and the retribution demanded by the elders of the village community to appease the gods of the ancestors whom the masked spirits represented.

4. Conclusions

The coming of the Europeans to the Igbo land had its positive and negative effects on the people and their culture. They opened up Africa and its cultures to the rest of the world. The Christianity and civil administration they introduced realigned and overhauled the religious belief and thought systems as well as the administrative patterns of the people. They destabilised the traditional institutions such as the masquerade institution, security architecture and religious institutions and implanted alien structures that were incongruous to the existent Igbo patterns of life. For instance, before they came, masquerades were the major apparatus of social control in Igbo communities. Today, the modern civil administration has edged out them to the margins of the security architecture; modern police have taken the centre stage in the social control system.

The arrival of the missionaries wreaked a great deal of havoc on Igbo cultural values and practices. Their presence has done much damage to the traditional values and institutions of the people [5]. For instance, they have destroyed many indigenous religious artefacts housed in pagan temples and shrines. These temples and shrines were the traditional museums where the artefacts were preserved. In today's world, with the resurgence of interest in Igbo cultural activities, they would have provided tourist facilities that could have contributed to the country's Gross Domestic Product. These temples and shrines that served as the traditional museums housed a vast quantity of artefacts, including highly priced masks. Out of naivety, Africans were beguiled by the European missionaries into destroying or trading these priceless treasures by barter for sugar or mirror to the Europeans. In the Europe and America today, their museums of African art have become one of their greatest sources of revenue.

The gullible Igbo people who converted to Christianity recklessly destroyed them in their zeal to conquer traditional belief system and everything connected with the traditional culture. Their actions caused irreparable damage to the Igbo cultural heritage. However, it is gratifying to note that although this much harm has been done to the Igbo cultural heritage, and occasionally is still being encouraged, some of the Igbo traditional institutions, for instance, the masquerade

institution, have continued to thrive^[19]. In all machinations to exterminate African traditional practices, total success could not be achieved because, among other reasons, Igbo culture has been firmly rooted in African soil and engrained in Igbo man's psyche before their contact with colonial experience. Therefore, their limited presence and influence could not completely destroy a cohesive culture with over five millennia of historical dynamism^[22].

Initiating into masquerade cults distinguished a man from the uninitiated and women, as well as qualified him to be involved in active participation in the decision-making process of his community. In the pre-Christian Igbo world, initiation defined a man. In some Igbo communities, initiation is a prerequisite for marriage. Therefore, it was almost an impossibility for an Igbo man who converted to Christian faith to renounce their involvement in masquerade activities. In addition, notwithstanding the degree of Western education an Igbo man has attained, he still had cerebral attachment to the activities of the masquerades because to them such renouncement is tantamount to cowardice and reduces a man to the status of a woman or an *ogbodu* (an uninitiated).

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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