

Ojionu Masquerade: Spirit Incarnate in Performance

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Abstract

This paper examines one of the most fascinating social masquerade institutions in Igbo culture, in Nigeria. The masquerade institution is seen as an anthropological continuum, manifesting in the people's long tradition of developed performance and festivities. The *Ojionu* masquerade, as an example of one of such numerous dynamic and virile masquerades, is studied as a spirit incarnate. The essence and spirituality of the masquerade; the masquerade's physical being and aesthetics; the thrilling, exciting and vibrant performance of the *Ojionu* masquerade, supported by pulsating rhythmic music; the organization and management of the *Ojionu* masquerade, as an example of an indigenous communal cultic institution, are studied and delineated upon. The research adapts and benefits from a "source study" based on personal interviews and the writer's privileged eye-witness account. It is significant to note that, the *Ojionu* masquerade, is often seen, perhaps, as the highest realms of entertainment for social occasion from a spiritually profound incarnate. The popularity and acceptability of the *Ojionu* masquerade remained stubbornly insuppressible aspect of the people's cultural entertainment despite the eroding and crushing influences of foreign cultures and, the unpopular and obnoxious anti-masquerade legislations by local and municipal governments and, above all, that of the orthodox foreign Eurocentric religious doctrines who refer to masquerade groups as "a congregation of Satan".

Key words: Spirit incarnate; Masquerade institution; Spirituality; Cultic institution; Cultural entertainment; Religious doctrines; Cultural art and performance medium

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INTRODUCTION

The masquerade tradition enjoys great popularity as an indigenous social, cultural and religious institution. It is built into the settled life pattern of most ethnic and cultural communities in Africa. The masquerade tradition is an inherited, cultural art form that has enjoyed continuity and durability from its primordial origin. It has also witnessed some evolutionary trends seen in the refinement of the performance forms and styles and, the performance paraphernalia. The institution is tightly linked with the people's world view and with community ceremonies, festivals and worships. Events like marriages, procreation, sacrifices, vocation, war, coronation, burials are graced and attended by masquerade to entertain and lead their celebrity to the event.

Perhaps, one of the most fascinating features of masquerades in traditional African communities is their sheer diversity. And, several factors seem to contribute to their general types and forms. Physical features and cultural functions are two vital factors that may place masquerades in their categories. Masquerades can also be identified and grouped by their medium of performance – song, music, dance, lampoon, violence, mimicry, vocalization, magic/spell and, at times, pageantry. In whatever performance medium, the masquerade's distinctive qualities include costume, the relationship with the crowd, mask or body structure, the beauty or ugliness; its complexity or simplicity in the performance of mythology and social belief systems. In a typical night, for instance, in an Igbo rural community, families have their senses of thrill and excitement aroused when the

night's peace is pierced by the harsh and sonorous voice of fearful, night masquerade (*Mmanwu Abani*) combined with the simulated roaring lion. Even without prior notice, the audiences – woken from slumber – then sit up and listen to a long night of songs and music accompanying the exposition and lampoon of the evil deeds and the anti-social acts of people in the community.

African cultures tend to have a pantheon of masquerades, each suited to particular occasions and ceremonies. Among the Igbo people of Nigeria, for example, masquerade performances mark the high point of most traditional/communal ceremonies (Uzoagba et al., 1991). The popularity and acceptability of ceremonial occasions are often judged by the number and dimensions of masquerades – physically manifested ancestors – that attended. As spirit incarnates, there is no doubt that ubiquitous masquerades have vital places in African societies. Using field work and personal interview with Igwelo Ikezulumba, a traditional masker, this study discusses the essence and spirituality of the *Ojionu* masquerade, popular among several Igbo groups.

1. ESSENCE AND SPIRITUALITY

The origin of the *Ojionu* masquerades is not clear as it is said to be one of the most indigenous social and cultural masquerades, which, perhaps, started with the formation of loose Igbo ethno-communities. *Ojionu*'s physical identity and thrilling public performances are distinct from other masquerades in Igbo land. The costume, music and dance remain virtually different in pattern, style and form compared with those of other masquerade troupes. And, the masquerader's creative agility is adapted to suit the pulsating and throbbing music as well as the cultural and religious ceremonies of the people, including purely entertainment events.

The *Ojionu* masquerade, like other masquerades in Igbo land is seen as sacred and powerful, highly revered and dreaded. There is a general belief that *Ojionu* is a spirit in physical manifestation – a spirit incarnate that is summoned to appear, through a process of prescribed, complex, ritual – as a representation of the ancestors imbued with spiritual powers in transcendental congregation of humans and non-humans. Thus invited, it is accorded all respect and deified in all attributes as a spirit that has visited humanity from spirit land. The most secretive aspect of *Ojionu* masquerade is its invocation and appearance with the related rituals. Only the respectable, elderly members of the cult, with proven integrity, perform the rituals and witness the emergence of the masquerade from the spirit land. The following is account of an actual performance witnessed during fieldwork with Igwelo Ikezulumba, an *Ojionu* masquerader.

The members had assembled at their base, the compound of their patron, a very elderly head of the village. They organized a few wooden benches within

the open courtyard under an *Ogbu* tree, which provided a shade from the scorching sun of the harvest season. The musical instruments were removed from the rafters in the *obi*, a small hut for general use for men affairs. The *Ojionu* music was playing as palm-wine was freely served. Soon, some members not playing the instruments, in no ordered form, occasionally responded to the music in a few dance movements, in a space central to the musicians' seating formation. The music rose in tempo and the atmosphere of conviviality was mixed with carnival gaiety.

Five elderly members of the troupe rose and withdrew into an enclosure, a space that normally serves as a pen or for other family purposes, like storage, etc. The rectangular space is surrounded by high mud-walls that continue on two sides as part of the compound fence and to, another enclosure for storage of yams. The men had a small gourd of palm-wine, a long cylindrical calabash cup and a large old, over-used, wooden, trunk box, and a straw bag. These items were brought down from the *obi* with the musical instruments. The music continued throbbing, ceaselessly rising in tempo and rhythmic quality. Time passed. A general sense of expectation and anticipation, mixed with optimism, enveloped the scene. Nobody was speaking. Only the drums and flute played. Occasionally, some voices of the men in the enclosure were heard either in babbles and jabbering, or in incantative manner, mixed with tones of supplication, invocation and occasional sharp, free vocalization. Soon after, there was an ululation within, mixed with excitement.

Two of the men, the most elderly, came out from the pen, one slinging the large raffia bag, the other holding the now empty gourd and the calabash cup. They rejoined the group of musicians, who then played with great vigour and intensity. With the flash of lightning, the *Ojionu* masquerade, as if catapulted by magical art, leapt and sat astride the mud wall surrounding the pen – each movement and gesture built into the rhythm of the music. The flutist who now stood at the centre of the open space, in front of the musicians, started moving towards the *Ojionu*, with rousing tones, obviously summoning, beckoning and urging the masquerade. A combination of events; the music, dance and movement culminated in a state of frenzy.

Simultaneously, the other men in the pen emerged and rejoined the group. One was carrying the old trunk, while another held a large raffia fan, obviously taken from the box. The box was no sooner kept in front, and centre of the musicians than the masquerade leapt to the floor, energetically danced towards the group, touched the heads of the two lead drummers, and with more spectacular dance, sat on the trunk box – all in movements built into the music and its rhythm. The music ceased instantly as the *Ojionu* sat down, and the fan bearer began to fan the masquerade on the right flank.

For the *Ojionu* masquerade to appear, according to the leader of the group, late Igwe Ikezulumba, family head and priest of several gods, one has to pray to the ancestors

(Personal Interview, 1966). An ant-hole is selected, circled with nzu, libation of palm-wine poured, alligator pepper thrown, and messages of supplication sent to the ancestors. Then an invocation leads to the emergence of the spirit from its homestead, the “earth bowl”. A similar ritual enables the masquerade to return peacefully to its abode after the fuction. According to Ikezulumba, masquerades are indeed spirits, to the Igbo. And, in the people’s definition, the Ojionu is a spirit incarnate – the essence of a departed ancestor, the embodiment of the spirits of the dead (Ikezulumba, 1966).

2. PHYSICAL ESSENCE

The physical body of Ojionu masquerade is covered and adorned with three different elements:

- A. The headdress,
- B. The body fabrics and the skirt of coloured raffia (*agwa*) and
- C. A band embroidered with cowries, worn on the waist and below the headdress.

The headdress is a carved, wooden stylization of the head of an antelope (*mgbada*) (Agu, 2005). When worn, it rests on the head of the masquerade with a horizontal, elongated projection to the front, which represents the antelope’s slightly opened and stylized mouth. The rear part shows two sturdy horns folded into semi-circular curves. The base of the mask is shaped to rest and balance on the wearer’s head, with the least possible discomfort and encumbrance of energetic movement. Around the base of the mask, is a band of thick, black fabric with about five horizontal rows of cowries strewn on it in a decorative form. From the headdress also and, beneath the band cowries, are two long overhanging pieces of fabric that drop as face, and neck coverings. The two pieces, with overlaps, are joined by the sides to conceal the ears and shoulders.

The body piece provides full covering, flowing down and tucking into raffia skirt. The two arms are covered with sleeves extending about 10 inches as overflow that terminate in tasseled design. The third is a unit of slacks, worn around the waist that fully covers the two legs and toes without provision or necessity for socks or shoes. Around the waist, and on top of the fabrics, are about four layers of raffia skirts of varying lengths and colours, which make a large heap, giving the masquerade a sturdy, awesome appearance. The topmost raffia skirt is bound together at the waist by another band of cowries similar to the one around the head gear. The *Ojionu* masquerade holds nothing in the hand during performance, but may use a raffia hand-fan while resting on the old, wooden, trunk box. The fabric is a traditional dark-blue, hand-woven, thick material with tiny white linings. It may be combined with lighter, identically coloured materials around the region of the face for aesthetic and practical reasons (Oguejiofor, 2005).

3. THE MUSIC

The Ojionu music is produced from percussion of five musical instruments. *Ekwe*, the rhythm and lead instrument, is a lightweight, hollowed and cylindrical wooden unit, which is slit centrally along the length. It is played by striking a pulpy, wooden batten on the edge of the horizontal slit leading into the hollow centre. The sounds produced vary with the point of contact on *Ekwe* as it is, by traditional ingenuity, designed to produce varying tones. In traditional parlance, the tones are called ‘male’ and ‘female’ – low and high tones respectively. On a cold, dry harmattan night, *Ekwe Ojionu* could be heard some ten kilometers away. The devising of this traditional instrument makes for excellent sound production and projection, which make modern electronic amplification systems unnecessary. It is carved out of hard *Uku*, *Ngwu* or *Anunu-ebe* tree.

There are two drums – *Nkere* and *Ogwe*. They are hollowed, light weight, wooden cylindrical units, each covered, on one end with taut layer of *Mgbada* (deer/antelope) skin and held in place by a network of tensioning strings. The *Nkere* is about fifteen inches long and ten inches in diameter, while the *Ogwe* is about four-feet long and eight inches in diameter. Two of them combine to produce the synchronized, pulsating rhythms for Ojionu display. The rattles, *Nyo* are a pair of conical baskets made of wound strips of flexible cane, with a metal base, and filled with pebbles, or *Udara* seeds. It is held at the end of the cone and shaken in rhythm to produce the desired sounds.

The *Oja* is a wooden flute designed with a network of side holes that are linked to the larger central, vertical opening. The lid to the large opening is rested on the lower lip while blowing. Three smaller holes are closed and opened with corresponding fingers by the flutist to produce variations of melody and tunes that could be deciphered by *Ojionu* and those who understand the language. The *Oja* is an intricate and harmonious musical instrument, fashioned with traditional skill and often seen as an acoustic marvel because of its captivating tunes. About eight inches long, and two inches in diameter by the lid, the *Oja* tapers down to the tail. In performance, the *Oja* and the *Nkere* are the closest accompanying instruments to *Ojionu*. Whereas the *Onye Oja* (*Oja* flutist) reports to *Ojionu* on the general safety situation of the performance venue (and spiritual environment) – from the privileged position of a man with metaphysical insight – the *Nkere* synchronizes every movement or gesture of *Ojionu* to the music (rehearsed or improvised). In situations where the *Nkere* misses the rhythm, which is considered an embarrassment to *Ojionu*’s public performance, the drummer may get an immediate reprimand. Depending on its temperament, the *Ojionu* may hit the drummer with the surplus fabric end of the sleeve of its upper garment, or pour some loose sand on his head to ‘awaken’ him to need alertness and presence of mind.

4. PERFORMANCE

The *Ojionu* is exclusively an entertainment masquerade that uses the medium of energy, rhythmic dance, garnished with mime, vigorous movement and, at times, exciting physical acts. These are accompanied with stimulating and throbbing music with rapidly changing tunes. With a reputation for dancing entertainment, the *Ojionu* masquerade remains one of the most popular in Igboland, its greatest asset being beautifully synchronized dance, mime and movement. This is either rehearsed or spontaneously improvised to rhythmic, captivating music coming from a dexterous percussion of little musical instruments. For a spotless performance, the Nkere player, at all times, has his whole attention focused on the masquerade to match movement with music. *Ojionu* dances, summersaults, rolls, jumps, moves, turns, advances, threatens, halts, freezes, runs and beautifully combines all these to tell a story. The audience responds by applauding and making monetary presents.

Onye Oja remains with the *Ojionu* at the centre stage, surrounded by the spectators. The *Onye Oja* observes the entire gathering and reports to the masquerade, warns him of any danger especially that relating to the use of charms and spells, and the presence of malevolent forces and malignant spirits. To an arousing and exciting coded flute communication, he further cheers, inspires, checks, urges, incites or even implores the masquerade in his actions:

O di kwo ghali ghali! (There is uncertainty)
Agwo no kwa nakilika. (Snakes has coiled up in grasses)
Agwo turu mbe, turu n'okori ko ya. (The snake that bites the tortoise, bites just the shell)
Ojionu Egbu oji. (*Ojionu* the masquerade)
Okwa ngi ka m na-akpo? (Is it you I am calling upon?)
Ekwena egwu gi ka ofuo ohia. (Do not allow your music to get lost in the bush)

Depending on his present state and temperament, but usually, when in very high spirits, *Ojionu* will retort in muffled 'spider' voice

Onye Oja m, Mmanwu m ekenee gi. (My flutist, my masquerade salutes you).
Anam anu na inti echirom! (I can hear you, I am not deaf)

As part of the preparation for *Ojionu* masquerade institution, *Onye Oja* is usually seasoned by a potent *Dibia*, (medicine man) for improved supernatural insight. He often carries the charm, usually defensive and protective in nature, for the masquerade and his men, in addition to the ones 'built' into their bodies.

Ojionu masquerade performs at both private and communal occasions. It could be invited; it could decide to make an independent outing. Occasions like burials, coronations, installations, funerals; festivals associated with harvest and planting, religious ceremonies, and quite recently, Christmas, New Year, Easter and *Mmanwu* Festivals have witnessed the appearance and entertainment of the *Ojionu* masquerade. It could perform in market and village squares, king's court, in family compounds (either

invited or on visitation), or in pageantry as it processes through the community.

The *Ojionu* institution is entirely male affairs, women do not get associated in any way, at any level. Even when men come home with yams, goats and chicken as part of present from their outing, the cooking is done at the *obi* of men and for the men alone. Male children could be invited to do minor kitchen jobs (usually done by women) as they may later, as adults, inherit the cult. As a community centered performer, *Ojionu* is respected and admired by both 'traditional' and 'modern' individuals for its ingenious outings. Like any other masquerade, its presence and appearance is greeted with awe because of its presumed supernatural essences. It is however not often dreaded as it is not a harmful or terrorizing spirit. *Ojionu*, which developed from cultic origin, is now an entertaining, social masquerade. It is not that *Ojionu* has lost its religious significance in Igbo land but, that its cultic functions have seized to be vital in temporary social and political systems.

Quite recently, in many communities in Igbo land, masquerade cults and institutions were outlawed by legislations, due to excesses of the use of charms and physical violence on citizens. The churches, in some communities, outlaw masquerading by Christians – describing it as 'satanic', 'devilish' or 'paganistic'. Some communities, through the agencies of the police, the local chiefs and local security personnel also make outright laws banning masquerade entertainments. These are some of the contemporary forces against continuity and the development of masquerade institution in Igbo land. Despite these antagonisms engendered by new religious, cultural and political dispositions in Igbo land (and Nigeria at large), the *Ojionu* masquerade has continued to enjoy occasional permissions to perform. And, Igbo masses have continued to welcome its performances. This popular support has, therefore, enabled the *Ojionu* to remain an insuppressible aspect of the people's cultural entertainment. However, while it is negative for the government to legislate against *Ojionu* and its performance, it is no less negative for performers to unlawfully deploy cultural privileges against the same masses they claim to entertain. Thus, there is need for cultural renegotiation between the state and traditional institutions on the one hand, and modernity and tradition on the other, to evolve social and legal frameworks that can enable the *Ojionu* – and other spirit incarnates – to entertain today's society.

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