
igala masquerades as agent of moral and Social Transformation

Theophilus Adama
Kogi State College of Education, Ankpa

Abstract

Igala people's worldview is a conglomeration summed up in their spiritual and secular lives. Igala people believe in the world of the living and world of the dead. It is believed that masquerades come from the world of the dead to guide, protect and conduct the affairs of men in the mortal world. Masquerades institution in Igala society is a male affair. Women and children are out of the scheme of masquerade activities. Some masquerades that are meant to maintain peace and order have turned to breakers of peace, law and order in the present society. Some masquerades are now used for stealing, looting, raping and retaliation. This paper investigates the role of masquerade as moral agent and social transformation among Igala people. As an important aspect of cultural patrimony, the institution should be harnessed and conserved for posterity. In order to properly articulate the subject matter this research adopted historical methodology.

Key words: Igala culture, masquerades, moral agent, social agent, social transformation.

Introduction

Masquerade is an integral part of Igala traditional practices. Masquerade phenomenon stems from Igala traditional world view. In their world view, they believe in life, death and after death. They believe that if any of them dies, his soul ascends to the spiritual realms and takes another body and reappears in masquerade form. This concept according to Egwuda-Ugbeda (2003, p357) "emphasizes the continuity of life and the recycling of life which is referred to as reincarnation. The dead come back into this world again by being born to an offspring or a very close relation, or through masquerade"

The Igala religious piety and reverence hold *Ibegwu* (ancestral spirits) to a high esteem. The dead who is now an ancestor is imbued with supernatural power to move at will to visit their living offspring through the process of reincarnation or sometimes as masquerade. The dead are always summoned into the masquerade representation hence there is strong link between the living and the dead through masquerade (Inyanda, 2010). In tandem with the above, Omegoha (2012, p3)

observed that “the influence of the ancestral spirit on the living are apparently demonstrated through the activities of the masquerade”.

The name Igala refers to both the people (*Abo Igala*) and the language (*Ichi Igala*). The Igala people inhabit between latitude 6⁰ and 8⁰ and longitude 6⁰ and 7⁰. They occupy a total land area of about 13,665 square kilometers. (Okwoli in Egbunu, 2009). The 2006 Federal Government census puts population of Igala people at 1.6million.

Among the Igala, it is believe that *Attah* Igala who is both the spiritual, political and cultural father/head of the Igala owns the masquerades hence references are made to masquerades as *egwu Attah* (*Attah's* masquerade) (Machi, 1980). As spirits who operate between the two realm of existence, masquerades are bilingual and guard jealously issues of morality of the family through the extended families to the village, town or community levels. They frown upon and punish severely any offence that borders on adultery, fornication, incest, stealing and any such actions considered immoral. They also stand out for justice and fair play by helping to enforce the laws of the land (Ugwu, 2000). Masquerades were seen as agent of peace among Igala people. The peace achieved by the masquerades was seen as one with a spiritual influence on the living, and as such was more long-lasting and just.

Owing to poor perception of the meaning and practice of most cultural tenets of Africans the western agents of civilization had alleged that African religion was heathenistic. They used other concepts to denigrate the practice of the people's religion. Such concepts include: paganism, fetishism, animism and things of such sort to qualify the traditional way of worshipping God. The effects of these attitudes loom so high on the use of some known and cherished cultural agents in achieving a good societal living (Omegoha. 2012). Western civilization brought enlightenment through the process of education. By this, the people became exposed to what hitherto has been accepted without question. On account of this, what were regarded as taboo in the authentic traditional society are given different interpretation today under the lens of education and civilization. Masquerade, hitherto taken to be the coming of ancestral spirits to the world of the living through the mouths of ant-hills are today known as men in mask (Okwo &Omegoha, 2014).

It is observed that in recent times some individuals mask themselves as masquerades into breakers of peace, law and order in the present society. They disguise into masquerades for stealing, looting, raping and retaliation. For example, in 2009 in Awo-ojuwo, a young man under the cloak of *Inyanwuna* masquerade waylays a young girl who was returning from catechismal class. The masquerade went away with seven hundred naira forcefully collected from the girl. Secondly, in 2013 a military patrol team was attacked at Ejegbo by a group of *Ukpokwu* masquerades. One of the soldiers lost his life in the incident. In this paper therefore attempts are made to examine through historical research

method the role of masquerade in the maintenance of peace, law and order in Igala society.

Concept of Morality in Masquerade

Morality is derived from the latin word ‘mores’ which means; conduct’. It is said to be the standard principles of good behaviour. It is the conduct of an individual. The word moral, according to Gyekye (1996, p55), refers to “a set of social rules and norms intended to guide the conduct of the people in the society. The rules and norms emerge and are anchored in people’s beliefs about right and wrong conduct and good and bad character”. This means that positive interactions and conduct to people gives confidence in one to relate with thereby making the society to be in decorum. Okwueze (2004) defined moral as specific form of social consciousness or awareness of your relatedness to others without, which social life would be impossible. This infers that morality which is held in high esteem in human relationship is an antidote of peace in the society. From the above definitions it is observed that the presence of masquerade in the society creates enabling environment for peace and justice to prevail.

Transformation is a marked change in appearance especially one for the better. It is an ideologically driven government policy which is geared towards aggressive development. It encompasses improved condition of living, improved environment, improved socio-economic dividends for individuals, group and corporate bodies. It could also mean stable political and economic growth, security of lives and properties, improved standard of living, food sufficiency and improved health services, functional educational system and uninterrupted power supply (Omachonu, 2013).

The Igala Masquerades

Masquerade according to Onah (2004:37) “are people wearing mask, strongly believed to impersonate brave people (men) who should have passed away long ago. In some cases however masquerades may also be seen as representing specially important and/or totemic animals.” Nzekwu (1981, p132) defined masquerade as “ancestral spirit on a visit to mankind”. Nzewi (1994, p13) posited that masquerade “is a spiritually super imbued human personality capable of commanding awe, respect and reverence of other men.” Masquerade therefore is the symbol of the spirit of the dead ancestors on a visit to the living for a symbiotic relationship.

Masquerades are ancestral spirits and operate as secrets cult which secrets and knowledge are exclusively that of men and initiates. The arts of masquerading are not divulged to women, children and non initiate. They do not come near where masquerades are found because it is believed that women and children are weak and can quickly reveal what they have seen. The much an initiate will tell the un-initiate is that masquerades are the spirit of the ancestors that come out through the mouth of an anthill to make peace among the living. It is a taboo to divulge the fact that human beings are behind the masks (Okwor & Omegaoha, 2014). In support of this Amade & Atule (2009) observed that;

The knowledge of masquerade is mostly restricted to the initiated members of a given society or the male elders where necessary. The knowledge of who put on the mask is strictly kept away from the children and women. Male children are not allowed because they are weak and cannot withstand the rigours faced by those to be initiated. They can easily cry or air the secrets behind certain masquerade.

It is also a taboo for women to have the knowledge of a certain masquerade not to talk about the person behind the mask. Despite the fact that we are in the era of decadence, and masquerading is often scored and misrepresented by the younger generation, they are still used by men to terrify and dominate women folk. Masquerade and its secrets are prerogatives of the men and only initiates. This is because a typical Igala man believes that women are weak, fickle and easily air out what they have seen and heard (p125).

To preserve its secrecy and make it relevance to the society, the members of the cult enter into a covenant not to divulge the secrets of the masquerades to non-members (Ugwu, 2000).

The Igala according to Egwuda-Ugbeda, (2003) have several masquerades which may be classified according to their locations, behavioural manifestations, structures and forms. Among the Igala masquerades, there are ugly masquerades, there are beautiful and handsome ones; there are male and female masquerades, there are gentle types and there are stubborn types, there are rich looking types and there are poor looking types.

The major classification of Igala masquerades are;

Egwu Attah (royal masquerades). According to Miachi (2012) masquerades in this category have link with the Attah who rank as the highest authority in Igala society. *Egwu Attah* ranks highest among igala masquerades. Examples of masquerade in this group according to Miachi (2012) are: *Obajadaka, Ekwe, Agbamabo, Epe, Odumado, Ichawula, ochochono, Ingelekpa, Ikelekwu, Afum, Abilifada, Ujamadeko* (also known as *Akeke*), *Ajamaa* (also called *Onu Ekwe*), *Ile – Enwu che* and *Ogede*.

Egwu Ugbe, Olopu (ancestral masquerade) is the second category. These masquerades are identified with very particular clans, forebears or lineages. According to Miachi (2012, p24) “the clan members give much regard to and even venerate them. Their function is to perform rituals during funeral ceremonies of dead adult members of their clans”. Examples are *Egwu Afia, Ogede* and *Akwuchi* masquerade at *Iyale, Olagenyi* masquerade and *inyanwuna* masquerade of Awo-ojuwo.

The third classification is *Egwu Icholo* (ritual performing masquerade). These masquerades perform different rituals. Examples are *Akwuchi, Olagenyi* and

Amuda which are owned by certain lineage groups who are said to celebrate *Okwula* festivals.

The fourth classification is the social masquerade. These masquerades according to Inyanda (2010) appear in social gathering, provides adequate entertainment for spectators with their stylized acrobatic displays. Examples are *Egwu-gbomgbom*, *Agbaka*, *Abule*, *Ukpokwu*, *Egwu Igba*, *Ajamaledede* and *Owuna*.

The last classification is the religious cult masquerades such as *Egwu ichekpa*, and *Egwu Alijenu*. These masquerades serve as media through which the people send their petitions and prayers to the Supreme Being.

Masquerades as Agents of Moral and Social Transformation

Igala masquerades are mechanisms of social control and are effective in the elimination or control of aberrant or unacceptable behaviour (Sergent, 1988). *Ajamaledede* masquerade could detect any social ills in the society without information. If any stolen property is presented to them or is kept at a place they coincidentally visit, they do not hesitate to voice it out immediately (Amade & Atule, 2009). *Ajamaledede* exposes and disciplines thieves, fornicators, indolent and naughty people, and sorcerers, men who are diabolical, girls and women who are wayward, murders and any act capable of tarnishing the image of Igala community. *Ajamaledede* disciplines people through physical confrontation. *Ajamaledede* uses proverbial words that are loaded with facts and meaning to psychologically chastise offenders. *Ajamaledede* publicly rebukes erring members of the society, calling out their names, warning and cursing them. *Abule* is a noise making masquerade that comes out at night and are believed to be omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient openly criticizes, satirizes and curses evil doers. *Abule* acts without fear or favour. They are known to expose people through proverbial statements and songs. *Abule* has absolute power over his people (Amade & Atule 2009). Cane bearers such as *Abucha*, *Egwu Opia*, and *olagenyi* flog anti-social members of society (Miachi, 1980). To this Onunwa (1990) observed that;

Offenders of public morality (thieves, adulterers, witches) are mercilessly beaten or flogged by the masqueraders. The masks of these secret clubs are used to enforce the ruling or decisions of the council of elders of the village by the way they display uncontrolled power just like the *mmuo* or *Alusi* (spirits) (p.29).

Through this function, the societal values, mores and cultic resources are transmitted significantly (Ugwu, 2007).

Reconciliation and peacemaking were vital aspect of the social aspect of masquerades. Igala masquerades such as *Egwu-Afia* settle dispute and misunderstanding. They adjudicate and their judgment is always considered to be final. No one ever dared to complain either during or after the adjudication.

Through this, peace is maintained. In tandem with the above, Achebe (1958, p66) pointed out the roles of masquerade among Umuofia when he said that “we have heard both sides of the case said evil forest. The leader of the nine *egwugwu* of the nine clans of Umuofia our duty is not to blame this man or to praise that, but to settle the dispute”.

The ancestral spirits (masquerades) purify the moral lives of the people. Evil is highly avoided and people strive to do good because they believe that nothing is hidden from their ubiquitous eyes. The ancestral cults renew the ancient traditional values in the minds of the adherents, and such values challenge the living for moral transformation in the society (Omegoha, 2012).

Masquerades such as *Egwu Ichekpa* and *Egwu Alijenu* performed the roles similar to that of the priest and prophets. In view of this Omegoha, (2012) observed that;

Masquerades performed the roles similar to that of the missionaries as priest, prophets and kings. As priests they make prescription of sacrifices to their adherents to appease the spirit of the ancestors. As prophets they forecast the impending doom to befall a community or an individual, and prescribe possible sacrifices as a panacea to the impending crises, and as kings they sit in judgment (p.11).

In Igalaland masquerades could be consulted for oath taking. If the gravity of the offence committed is high and defies possible human solution, the accused may go beyond swearing in the shrine. The traditionalist proceeds to present the masquerades before the accused for oath taking. Through oath taking, the truth, integrity and reliability are better determined and morality is enforced. Since oath is taken for exoneration or punishment, it has the function of deterring liars or would-be offenders and thereby reducing crime rate in the community.

Amuda masquerade of *Idedeba* is renowned for his mystical and clairvoyant power. He diagnosis illness and provides medicines for their cure. He knows and can detect witches and ask them to publicly confess that they are witches. If they refuse to confess publicly, such persons could be struck dead by the power of *Amuda* (Miachi, 1980). This function is similar to that of *Ndoka Gboya* of the Nupe people which Parrinder (1977) described thus:

The chief activities of *Ndako Gboya* are masquerades, during the course of which ordeals used to be administered and people tried for witchcraft. A woman accused by the maskers would be forced to dig the ground with her bare fingers and if blood appeared under her nails she would be proved a witch; it must have been very hard to prevent this. The bull-roarer was sometimes used, and dances were performed during which witches were accused by the maskers apparently at random (p.133).

Igala masquerades such as *Agbaka*, *Ukpokwu*, *Egwu Igba*, *Egwu-Gbomgbom* and so on appear in social gathering and provide entertainment and recreational activities through their acrobatic display. To buttress this fact Onunwa (1990) observe that:

Furthermore, some provide recreational activities and entertainments at public rallies, funeral ceremonies of their members, traditional annual festivals of the community, etc. some of them provide such entertainments and amusement and in return expect gifts from the audience or spectators. The *Agbogwu* dances beautifully like a young bride and win admiration of spectators in public gathering (p.29).

Abule and *ukpokwu* masquerades watch over public utilities such as markets, rivers, streams, roads, oil palm plantation and so on. These places are kept under their care through *ine* (ban on properties). In the local setting these masquerades are used to enforce payment of levies. They do this through confiscating the property of the defaulter estimated to worth the amount at stake. Before the victim reclaims his/her confiscated property he/she must pay inconvenience levy along with the main levy.

Recommendations

Initiation rites of the masquerade should be made stricter by the initiators. This will ward off people using the mask without the knowledge of masking tradition and those who commit crime with it.

Elders who are custodians of masquerades should play protective roles to masquerades so that women, non-initiates and others who treat masquerades with levity and disdain should be brought to book.

Custodians of various masquerades should ensure that participation in masquerade activities should be restricted to only adult males in order to remove occultic practices in Igala masquerading tradition.

Igala masquerade institution should be encouraged by the State ministry of culture through organizing annual masquerade festival thereby showing their importance and distaste for evil activities in the society.

Conclusion

Igala people are controlled by their norms and worldview. Masquerade is part of Igala traditional worldview. They believe masquerades are the ancestor that has come to visit the living in order to unite the living and the dead ancestors. The use of masquerade keeps memory of the past and the present together. Masquerades are used to call any person with outrageous behaviour to order.

References

- Achebe, C. (1958). *Things fall apart*. London: Hamamann Educational books.
- Amade, A. & Atule, E. E. (2009). The concept of masquerade in Igala Land: A paradigm for good governance. In A.O Edegbo (Ed) *Education, good governance and challenges of nationhood in Nigeria*. Pg120-126. Lagos: Samtrade.
- Egwuda-Ugbade, F. (2003). The role of arts, science and technology in African masquerade performance: a macro view of akwujane masquerade of Igala. *Nsukka Journal of Humanities*. Pgs 358- 364
- Gyekye, K. (1996). *African cultural values: An introduction*. Accra: Sankofa.
- Inyanda, S. (2010). *Masquerade theatre among the Igala: A case study of Agbaka performance*. An unpublished M. A. Thesis. Department of theater Arts, Benue State University, Markurdi.
- Miachi, T. A. (1980). Masquerades as agents of social control among Igala. A. *Journal of Igalaland*, 2 (1), pgs 78- 88
- Miachi, T. A. (2009). *Introducing the Igala people*. Programme of events of 53 Anniversary of the enthronement of His Royal Majesty Alhaji Dr. Aliyu O. Obaje. As the Attah Igala.
- Miachi, T. A. (2012). *The incarnate being phenomenon in African culture. An anthropological perspective on the Igala of North Central Nigeria*. Ibadan: Kraft books Limited.
- Nzewi, M.(1994). *New roles for old spirits: Mmanwu as Agents of Discipline and cultural continuity*. Enugu: Government Press
- Nzekanwu, O. (1980). "Masquerade" in drama and theatre in Nigeria: A critical source look. In Ogbenyi (ed) *Nigeria Magazine*. Pg. 15- 18 Lagos:
- Okwueze, M. I. (2004). Religion and the decaying moral values in contemporary Nigerian society In M. I. Okwueze (Ed), *Religion and societal development in contemporary Nigerian perspectives*. Pg1-10 Lagos: Merit International Publication.

-
- Okwor, C. O. & Omegoha, F. (2014). Masking tradition and masquerading in Nsukka Northern Igboland: Ancient and Modern. In *Nigerian Journal of Social sciences*. Pg 31-43
- Omachonu, C. G (2013). *The place of Indigenous Languages in early childhood care, development and education (ECCDE) implication to national security in the transformation agender*. A paper presented at the 13th Annual conference of the association of Nigerian language teachers at F C T, COE Zuba 26th =30th August.
- Omegoha, F. I. (2012). *The collapse of masquerades as moral agents and social transformation in Nsukka cultural zone*. A seminar paper presented in the department of Religion and Cultural Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Onah, R. C. (2004). *Experiences of traditional custom and religion: An Igbo example*. Nsukka: Chuka Educational Publisher.
- Onunwa, U. (1990). *Studies in Igbo traditional religion*. Obodi: Specific publishers.
- Parrinder, G. (1977). *West African religion*. Great Britain: Redwood burn Limited.
- Sargent, R. A. (1988). "Dynastic history and a face of the nation". In I. K Sidney (Ed) *West African masks and cultural system*. Pgs. 42- 53
- Ugwu, C. O. T. (2007). Continuity of the ritual process: Children in Masquerade tradition among Nsukka Northern Igbo people. *Nigerian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* pg1-11. Nsukka: Great AP express publishers.
- Ugwu, C. O. T. (2000). *Sources and Enforcement of Morality in Igbo Traditional society*. A conference paper presented at the Biennial Conference of the West African Association of theological Institutions held between 30th July to 5th August, 2000, at the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso.