

## Repositioning Costume and Mask as Essential Elements of Okoroso Masquerade of Ali-Ogba

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### Abstract

From ancient till present, Costume and Mask have unequivocally positioned as most essential elements of ancestral veneration and deity worship of the Ali-Ogba culture, thereby delineating the traits of the deities of which the Masquerades represent. Due to the efficacy of the Okoroso costume and mask towards metaphysics, they are regarded sacred, isolated, and guided from the reach of the people and possessed by the ancestors that they represent. These notions have contributed tremendously towards preserving her tradition, religion, culture, norms, value, artifacts, functions, occupations and way of life of the Ali-Ogba people. The economic and cultural importance attributed to costume and mask of the Okoroso masquerade have drawn attention in all works of live. Despite these attributes, Okoroso costume and mask are today considered as second class placing more emphasis on performers/actors. This is so because they believe that the performers are the agents of the art while costume and mask are the media. The agent represents the deities who were considered as their dead ancestors, therefore, coming in human form through the medium of costume and mask to communicate with their loved ones while costume and mask are considered spectacle creating aesthetics to the art. This has gravely affected the cultural values therein the Okoroso masquerade. Thus, using the narrative methodology, this paper explores the importance of costume and mask towards sustaining Okoroso masquerade culture of Ali-Ogba. The study recommends that costume and mask should be repositioned and regarded essential elements of the Okoroso masquerade in Ali-Ogba.

### Keywords:

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## **Background to the Study**

From time immemorial till present, costume and mask, with little application of makeup, usage of hand properties (whips, hand fan, cutlass, broom etc.), and body decoration have always positioned as essential elements of Okoroso masquerade festival of Ali-Ogba people, serving as the microcosm of the macrocosm of the typical traditional African culture, tradition, norms, and way of life, thereby leaving the wearer/impersonator as second of the art. Combining all of these gives a totality of identification and semblance of the deity or ancestors of which are represented. To this, forfeiture of any automatically gives sheer misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the originality as to how Ali-Ogba masquerade festival activity in general is existentially believed and practiced.

As regards the masquerade act, costume and mask are everything as there cannot be a masquerade activity without both. Costume defines masquerade, and vice versa. Indeed, the characteristics of a specific masquerade are most often embedded in its costume and mask head (Alex, 2012). Beyond its size, shape and weight, it is the nature of the particular costume worn by the Ukwu Nde Ochie Okoroso masquerade group that makes it the king over all masquerades in Ali-Ogba kingdom. In spite of the above exposition, Alex closely observes that masquerade art is more than mere costuming; hence, the myth behind the masquerade performance is what makes it more than man, which is, the impersonation of the luminal essence of our ancestors. This statement by Alex is plausible because the mystical power (spirits) behind the masquerade is supreme and essential. On the other hand, Nkechi (2008) argues that costume and mask, despite being constructed by man, are seen as most essential elements that define and interpret the celestial knowledge and activities of our ancestors to the living. By this statement, Nkechi believes that mask and costume is attributed to the deity, since it is a direct representation of the ancestors that define the deity.

Explicitly, costume is cloth and other adornment worn by a performer for a particular purpose. It is dress or apparel, including all the garments worn at one time; external dress, especially that of a performer; hence dress in general. This definition is plausible due to the fact that it is usually worn on the body both for religious, ceremonial or social purposes. In the Theatre for instance, costume is worn by an actor while performing a role. It is apparel according to the Encyclopedia Americana Dictionary (1967) intended both to impress an audience and to help a performer impersonate a character. The purpose of costume in theatrical production then is to aid characterization and the story itself. Costume helps the audience understand who a character is in the context of the production or performance and has been established as having functional, supportive, and decorative characteristics (Nkechi, 2008). In real life, clothes define our taste and are an expression of our personality, culture, norms, tradition, religion and way of life. Costumes establish individuality and provide clues to our cultural identity as it relates to our ancestral veneration and deity worship. This makes costume a total design having met the three important characteristics of a good festival design.

This importance includes that:

1. It is supportive because it helps the actor, performer, or impersonator to assume his/her own impersonation convincingly.

2. It is decorative as it adds to the overall aesthetic of the performance.
3. Most importantly, mostly in the theatre, costume can also mean live scenery worn by an actor in a particular role in a particular play.

Extensively, costume is the exterior reflection of the actors impersonation, which assumes that the person portrayed is someone other than the actor himself (Francis, 1998). To this, costumes are associated with the moving actor. On the other hand, such as costume, mask is typically an object normally worn on the face, typical for protection, disguise, performance, or entertainment. Functionally, masks have been used since antiquity for both ceremonial and practical purposes. They are usually worn on the face, although they may also be positioned effectively elsewhere on the wearers body (Wikipedia, 2018). Masks in various form (sacred, practical, or playful) have played a crucial historical role in the development of understandings what it means to be human, because they permit the imaginative experience of what it is like to be transformed into different identity or to affirm an existing social or spiritual identity (Emmanuel, 2016). Plainly, Spirit (deities or ancestors) of which the mask represents are an integral part of the African world as asserted by Bernard (2017). By extension, Bernard argues that the spirit world is an extension of the human world in Africa and their gods (spirits) are the final measure of eternity, as humans are of earthly transience. Thus, ancestors, being members of the spirit world, according to Bernard, are considered important members of the African cosmos. It is to this that the presiding deity in charge of the Okoroso mask is termed Echina.

Extensively, affirming to the social and spiritual transformation of the wearer to the way of life of a typical African tradition, masks are a familiar and vivid element in many cultures and traditional pageants, ceremonies, rituals and festivals, and are often of an ancient origin. Thus, masks have been worn in nearly all cultures, for various reasons, since the Stone Age. Ascribing this to culture, Anyanwu (2003) asserts that it is perceived as a way of life, encompassing all human efforts and achievements and the attitudes or behaviour at work. Similarly, the document established in Nigeria's cultural policy in 1988 according to Anyanwu argues that culture is the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in the attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organization, thus distinguishing a people from their neighbors'. In like manner, UNESCO (2008) observes that culture refers to the language, beliefs, values and norms, customs, roles, knowledge, skills, and all other things learned by people who are made up through that way of life. This assertion explains why Okoroso Masks are referred to as ethos and embodiment of Ali-Ogba culture and tradition.

Connotatively, Alex (2012) noted that "culture has been variously described as a way of life or the shared beliefs, customs, and behaviour of a specific group of people often in specific locations". This assertion is plausible because culture is dynamic hence develops and evolves. Alex went on to asserts that "culture can be regarded as that which already is hence even though it is said to be dynamic, it can equally connote tradition or that which does not easily change, hence its view as an accepted way of doing things". In a nutshell, among many African

natives, masks are culturally used for religious ceremonies, as well as part of ceremonial costumes (Soyinka, 1976). They often were made to represent the spirits of ancestors or certain local deities.

To this fact, and most significantly, African masks usually have spiritual and religious meanings and are used in ritual dances and ceremonial and religious events. African masks come in all different colours, such as red, black, orange and brown etc., (Wikipedia, 2018). In most traditional African cultures, the person who wears a ritual mask conceptually loses his or her human life and turns into the spirit represented by the mask itself. A dancer wearing a mask in a theatrical performance in the Crab Theatre of the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Port-Harcourt, Nigeria, was thought to have been possessed by the spirit represented by the mask he wore. This is evident in most African traditional theatre where the mask wearer is usually larger than life. This transformation of the mask wearer into a spirit usually relies on other practices, such as specific types of music and dance, or ritual costumes that contribute to conceal the mask wearer's real identity.

Since all masks, costume, body decoration, and make-up have specific spiritual meanings, most traditions comprise several different traditional masks. Make-up, body decoration, and hand props are less significant in masquerade activities compared to mask and costume. This is so because most masquerades make use of mask and costume, paying little or no attention to make-up save body decoration which is usually drawn on the wearer's hands and legs. Conclusively, mask is an art form. It is the sculpting of the cheekbones, selecting a colour palette to compliment the eyes, and reshaping the brows to balance the face can be compared to designing (Courtney, 2009).

It is to these speculates and exposition that costume and mask have pragmatically positioned as essential elements in Okoroso masquerade activities of Ali-Ogba people. Evident of this is seen the loss of powers and spiritism regarding the ancestors and deities which they imitate by an Okoroso masquerade each time the wearer or actor refuses to put on the rightful costume and mask meant for a particular ancestor or deity. To this, costumes and masks used to depict the Ali-Ogba deities are considered sacred and out of reach from non-initiates. It is only made available to the initiate only as at the time of its festival or other cultural activities.

Despite these revelations, costume and mask of the Ali-Ogba people is today seen as second class element of the Okoroso masquerade activities, placing the actors above. They are presently used for ceremonial activities that negate its primary notion regarding ancestral veneration and deity worship. They are most times hired for entertainment and social purposes. The negative effects of these create gradual abolition of ancestral tradition, culture, and norms passed down from one generation to another. This has unequivocally posed as threat on the younger generation and the generations unborn.

It is to this fact that costume and mask should be repositioned as essential elements of deity worship and ancestral veneration of the Okoroso masquerade festival of Ali-Ogba people. This forms the thrust of this study.

### **Narrative Theory**

Narrative theory by Vladimir Propp, propounded in the year 1928 is a cradle of which this study is shaped. Narrative theory over the years has become increasingly concerned with historical, political, and ethical questions. At the same time, it has moved from its initial home in literary studies to take in examination of other media (James & Peter, 2005). Narrative theory in this study helps towards explaining the importance of costumes and masks as used in the Okoroso masquerade activities which defines its activism to spiritism and deity representation. Extensively, the first issue in assessing existing narrative theories is that they are intended to support the analysis of existing narrative rather than the generation of new narrative (Sandy & Ruth, 2004). Thus, researchers have tried to adapt them to generative narrative, so that they cannot be excluded as useful guides for this reason alone. Relating this assertion to Okoroso masquerade of Ali-Ogba, it is pertinent to highlight the efficacy and importance of the costume and mask used by the ancestors of Ali-Ogba people in the primitive time to the present time.

### **Pragmatics and importance of Okoroso Masquerade Festival of Ali-Ogba**

Armed with the already discussed Narrative theory, this essay investigates the importance of Okoroso Masquerade Costume and Mask practices from prehistoric time till the present. Tracing back to history and in whatever locality we find ourselves, there have always been a cultural identity that portrays our religion and practices, moral values, drumming and dancing, drama and art, all these are microcosm of indigenous African masquerade festivals. Masquerade festival activities in the traditional African system helps in so many ways toward preserving the culture, norms, value, and even religion of the primitive people. Its cultural heritage influences every aspect of life (Samuel, 2011). Its presence can be experienced and interpreted differently within the people in different region in African metropolis. An example as such is the Okoroso masquerade which is a generational act of the typical Ali-Ogba people that retells and encapsulates the ancestral activities of deity worships, ancestral pre-occupations that are passed down from time immemorial, known and practiced only by the Ali-Ogba people. The Okoroso masquerade practices highlights the activities engaged in by the ancestors of the Ali-Ogba people which define its activism in the pursuit of identification.

The Okoroso worship is a deity involvement characterized by holistic phenomenon which defines its modus operandi regarding the magnificent and holistic magnifications therein its involvement in spiritualism. In all, through traditional annual festival of the divinities and the ancestors, the Okoroso masquerade festival has become more dynamic and a living faith which continues to be relevant to the people and all aspects of their daily living, despite the incursion of western culture, Christianity and Islamic worship. It provides the opportunity for elders to pass on folk knowledge and the meaning of tribal lore to younger generations. It is symbolization of Ali-Ogba deity, in that it is a representation of not only the physical and continuous presence of the ancestors but their luminal sense of justice and equity.



Specifically, in Ali-Ogba kingdom, it is very difficult to grasp in a single word or sentence what Okoroso (spirit masquerade) is because of its metaphysical nature, which is highly secretive and never talked about even amongst the initiates. It is even taboo to recite the language and mantra of the Okoroso by non-initiates. The initiates are not also allowed to recite it unless when they are in the Okoroso, either during the Iyapiaisu or Igbajempkura period or the Itusi Okuloko or IgbajeUturu. It is so because it is often referred to as symbolic resurrection of the ancestors. To the Ali-Ogba people, Okoroso symbolized both the ancestral shrine (Echina), as well as the resurrection spirits of the dead elders, whose appearance and performance played a protective and regulatory role in the affairs of the living. The spirituality therein Okoroso Masquerade were evoked in the festivity through the adoption of a deity called "Echina". The significance of the Echina to the practice is to command loyalty and obedience of the native as well as promoting unity amidst members.

This ultimate and dynamic importance of masquerade is seen in every culture therein African continent, thus, Okoroso (spirit masquerade) such as the Egungun masquerade in Yoruba whom are people risen from the dead-bones (skeleton), that are made alive, hence the assumption that they are heavenly beings (Obaseki, 1993), is advantageous to the Ali-Ogba people in that it helps to identify and preserve the culture and tradition of the typical Ali-Ogba people. On the other hand, Okoroso masquerade also performs certain social control function by enforcing discipline and upholding natural law. The power of the Okoroso masquerade cult is such that even kings are under their authority since they are believed to be agents of supernatural wisdom.

Most certainly, Okoroso masquerade is a celestial celebration accord and presented yearly mostly early January and resolute in early March, such as the individual communities and clans inclined in the Ali-Ogba geographical phenomena. Thus, Ali-Ogba, having five clans enshrined, likes of Usomini, Igburu, Obieti, Omoku and Egi defines its modus operandi, such as some of them being Owudancers while some others are Okoroso dancers, though synonymously representational in practice. These diverse communities with different ideologies define their methods, application and worship of the masquerade headed by Ogbowu (chief priest of Echina), Onuotu (assistance chief priest), Isi-chi (third in command), Eze-Igbo (the governor general), Utumaonugha (the treasurer) and Eze Ukwnu Ndeochie (the head of the Ukwnu Ndeochie Group). These six personalities constitute the executives of the Okoroso Masquerade society. Notwithstanding, each of these communities or clans has its own Echina (deity), which defines its authority for the Okoroso activities.

The Okoroso masquerades in Ali-Ogba are of many types, differentiated with costume, mask, make-up, and body decoration. These differences in nomenclature help to delineate traits attributed by the deity or ancestors that the masquerades represent. Due to this fact, costume and mask seem to be essential elements that define the religious, social or economic notions for the festivity. It is as a result of this fact that mask used by the Okoroso masquerade of Ali-Ogba is taken as physical representation of their brave warriors, ancestors and deities who they believed are daily protecting, providing, and communing with the living, thus,

directing their parts for a better living, while the actors (impersonators), make-up, hand props (whip, cutlass, broom etc.), and body decorations serves as accomplices.

### **Pragmatics of Okoroso masquerade Costume and Mask**

In Ali-Ogbakingdom, mask and costume have been a prominent and lucrative part of her culture and tradition dating back to prehistoric age and have positioned as base for deity celebrations and ritual performances. Thus, art of mask and costume making were connected with magical practices that revolved around worship, music, and dance. Basically, masks in Ali-Ogba kingdom are used for religious and ceremonial purposes. For example, mask used by Ohua, Ogbu, and Ehi Okoroso (spirit) masquerade are naturally used for religious purposes, such as Iyapialsu (evoking the Echina deity) and Igbaji-Ipkara (traditional barricade). There costume which is usually a long, black satin wrapper tied on the head and down to the toe, then graced with well caved face mask, usually of black is also used for ritual purposes. Other masks such as Atupko Ayara, Atupko Nnunu, OkwaArio, Okwa Akara, Nwanyinma, Okwodi, Nkwolobi, and EbuluOkwa, are used for ceremonial purposes. They are mostly used during Itusi Okuloko (welcoming the descendant of Echina deity) period. In most occasions, they all perform religious purposes.

The Ogalugwu, Ikpara, Ibekwe, Okigbo, and Obulogwe dancers do not wear wooden, metal or clay mask. They wear short and transparent satin cloth of any colour on their face and long gown tied with rope at the wearer's waist before covering their head with a long satin cloth that swings behind the performer each time he displays.

The Ukwnu Ndeochie dancers which are referred to as the ancestral head of these masquerades administratively are usually separate from all. This is so because they do not wear mask nor cover their faces with satin cloths. They rely more on elaborate costume, make-up and body decoration. Notwithstanding, the younger ones amongst the Ukwnu Ndeochie performs different functions outside the primary function of the Ukwnu Ndeochie group. This young group from the Ukwnu Ndeochie carries whip which they use to chase other masquerades and observers each time they are performing EgwuOhuku (spirit dance). This younger group is usually seen in Okpu Agwu (warriors cap), long mixed coloured cloth that is worn from their head to their lower limb before wearing the Okpu Agwu, and transparent satin on their face. The senior Ukwnu Ndeochie also wears the Opku Agwu and expensive wrapper tied on their left shoulder. This they graced with Oji (a long iron magical staff).

The Ohwa, Ogbu and Ehi masks are usually associated with supernatural beings and most times buried in grave yards or kept in Echeta's shrine for months in order to be fortified by the spirit of the ancestors. While that of other masks which are for ceremonial purposes, are kept in the house of the Ogbowu, Onuotu, Ezechi and Ezeigbo which are the spiritual heads of the four major clans in Ali-Ogba. The masks are not to be seen or touched except for certain and specific occasions outside the festive era such as Isota Ili (final burial rite of the deceased Okoroso members).

Despite this attributes rendered above, costume and mask are today considered as second class placing more emphasis on performers/actors. This is so because they believe that the performers are the agents of the art while costume and mask are the medium. The agent according to them represents the deities who were considered as their dead ancestors, therefore, coming in human form through the medium of costume and mask to communicate with their love ones that they left behind; while costume and mask are considered spectacle that creates aesthetics to the art. This singular act tells less of the costume and mask which till date remains as symbolic representation of the ancestors. This believe negates the assertion by Eruvbetine (2017), quoting Achebe, that "...the man who carries a deity is not a king. He is there to perform his god's ritual and to carry sacrifice to him..." On this note, placing much emphasis to performers/actors such as Orukwowa and Owuma and others is not right as it gives negative interpretation of the original nature of the Okoroso masquerade activities.

### **The Sacred Nature of Okoroso Masquerade Costume and Mask**

It is plausible to state that the Costumes and Masks used by the Okoroso masquerade group of Ali-Ogba people are the most essential element due to its association to spiritism and magical powers. In the primitive time, Okoroso costume and mask were regarded sacred and attributed to spiritism, thus was excluded from the reach of the initiates and natives as a result of the metaphysical powers that possesses anyone who touches or wears it, that differentiates it from other arts. This fact defines the reason why the Ohua and Ehi mask wearer are usually chained across their waist while two able men control the long chain at far. This is to avoid massive destruction of lives and properties by the masquerade, which is at this point possessed by the mask and costume he is wearing. It is to this fact that the Ohua, Ehi and Ogbu masks are usually buried in the burial ground or kept in the Echina (Okoroso deity) shrine. It is also as a result of the mystical powers that the Okoroso costume and mask possessed that series of sacrifices were usually performed before the people chosen by members of particular clan entitled to wear them could put them on.

This assertion clarifies the notion that the Okoroso costumes and masks are meant to be for ritual and ceremonial purposes as it relates to the deity, ancestors or members either initiated or re-incarnated. The Okoroso costumes and mask are not meant or employed for social purposes that negate the originality of its practices. They are also not supposed to be used for artistic and commercial purposes, thus, hiring is termed taboo. But today, the later is most times reported.

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing, it is pertinent to deduce categorically that costume and mask defines the personality of Okoroso masquerade which is believe to be direct descendant of Ali-Ogba deities. Such as the god Dionysus of the ancient Greek methodology are regarded sacred and worshiped annually, the ancestors and deities of Ali-Ogba are also celebrated and worshipped once in every year. To break the forth-wall between the ancestors (deities) and the living, medium of communication and representation was established through the usage of mask and costume.



It is also observed that costumes and masks are from prehistory considered as most paramount because they define, characterized and delineate each ancestor's according to their mode of importance and function in the Okoroso practices. It is to this function bestowed on Okoroso costume and mask that Ogbu masquerade is regarded as supreme over all because it represent their deity, Echina, while others like Ohwua and Enhi represents their dead warriors. As a result of this, Ogbu masquerade, having a black satin garment, worn from the head to its toe, with black face mask, decorated with black feathers at the top, performs both religious and ceremonial functions. For example, the Ogbu masquerade usually leads in the procession during the Iyapiaisu or Igbajempkura (traditional barricade) period or the ItusiOkuloko or IgbajeUturu (spiritual fortification, sacrifice done in honour of Echina, and evoking the Echina deity), or the welcoming procession of Orukwowu (a male re-incarnation of Echina deity) and Onwuma (female re-incarnation of Echina deity) babies to the mother earth.

Due to this obligations meted by costume and mask towards being essential in the Okoroso masquerade practices, considering the fact that the spirit of the Echina deity or the dead ancestors cannot possess the wearer unless through the costume and mask which represents the deity is worn by anybody from the families in the clan or village chosen by the supposed deity, costume and mask are to be regarded most essential in the Okoroso masquerade art.

### **Recommendation**

Considering the above findings that without Costume and Mask, the Okoroso masquerade of the Ali-Ogba people is handicapped, it is therefore important to recommend the following:

1. Costume and mask should be considered and repositioned as essential element that defines the activities of Okoroso practices, thus should be kept out from the reach of initiates and natives except for religious and ceremonial purposes which they stand for.
2. The function of Okoroso Costume and mask should be for religious and ceremonial purposes as defined by the Okoroso masquerade cult, passed down from the ancestors to the living. Thus, the Okoroso costume and mask should not in any way be lent, borrowed, sold or used for social and commercial purposes.
3. The Okoroso costume and mask should be buried in burial grounds or kept in Echina's shrine, in custody of the Eze-oji or the Ogbowu, as such defines its activism to spiritism.

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