

Modern Transformations in Three Selected Masquerades in Nsukka-Ngwo Cultural Complex of Igbo Land

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Abstract

The paper examines the impact of modernity and urbanization on Igbo masquerades Viz: Adamma, Ekwe and Oriokpa. From the study, we notice significant transformations, reflecting traditional and modern conditions. Findings reveal that Adamma is highly influenced by urbanization, with disco-type dance movements and modern facial features. Ekwe is embellished with symbols reflecting traditional, modern as well as urban acculturation and Christian values. Oriokpa has a shift from traditional to modern values in performance. The paper concludes that Igbo masking institutions have been blending traditional and modern realities. These transformations underscore the receptivity and the dynamic nature of Igbo culture.

Keyword: *Modernization, Urbanisation, Igbo masking, Adamma, Ekwe, Oriokpa*

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Background to the Study

By 1959, Simon Ottenberg had written about Igbo receptivity to change and pointed out, how the open nature of Igbo culture had predisposed the Igbo to the acceptance of urban conditions. Herbert Cole (1982), has demonstrated clearly the dynamics of change as reflected in the Mbari Shrine temple, and of themes ranging from mythology, (Ala, Amadioha and to the modern transformations policemen nurses, cyclist etc.)- From Cole's study, one notices that what we regard as Igbo traditional reality has within it traces of modernity. These factors of change and transformation suggest the impact of urbanization in Igbo society including material culture and masking institutions and the reverse movement of urban values to the different Igbo villages and communities. These factors may have been responsible for the new transformation occurring in Igbo masking. And yet available literature (Boston 1960, Jones 1984 and others) tends to play down the impact of change in the understanding of Igbo masking and the gradual breakdown of traditional institutions.

Three factors may have served as a catalyst to Igbo predisposition to urbanization. The first has to do with the era of slave trade followed closely by the palm oil trade in the nineteenth century (Dike 1956). This had exposed the Igbo to a new contact situation. According to Aniakor (1978) "The trans-Atlantic trade created new trade opportunities for the Igbo given the intense competition that ensued between the various trading houses along the coast to which the Igbo were drawn as allies though at first as slave members. There was competition in the supply of slaves to the European traders, access to important trade outposts in the hinterland and control of such markets in order to ensure a regular supply line". Many Igbo who were drawn into this trade abandoned their traditional farming occupations in favour of trade.

According to Blair "migration and settlement focused upon the major locations of economic activity: mines, plantation, cash crop farming, transport and processing plants" (1978 p. 283). However, by the early decade of the 20th Century, new colonial administrative centres had been established in many Igbo towns such as Enugu, Onitsha, Aba and Owerri as both commercial and political centres. The rise of European-type city urbanization in Nigeria and in particular the Igbo area is often attributed to the creation of new economic and social conditions in the urban areas and cities through large-scale modernization. This in turn attracted rural migrants to the urban centres in order to take advantage of new commercial and trade opportunities as office cleaners, petty traders, coal miners, clerks and entrepreneurs.

Missionary education had also exposed the Igbo to new cultural ways, both secular and religious. These factors have reshaped Igbo attitude and defined new areas of change and transformation in Igbo life as well as masking institution. In addition, the colonial institutions initiated massive change in the belief-system among the Igbo. The native courts and police authority became responsible for maintaining law and order. These not only undermined the functions of certain masquerades and the existing traditional legal system that held allegiance to *oha* and council of elders but had also undermined ancestral

sanctions over matters that needed spiritual authority. The colonial economy orientated towards the metropolis attracted people from the rural to urban centres. It initiated a complex process of rural -urban migration amongst people seeking for white collar jobs and other fortunes within a monetized economy. In this paper, attempt is made to situate the nature of transformations in Igbo masking in the Nsukka-Ngwo areas of Igboland by examining the following:

Nsukka-Ngwo Igbo Masking and the Dynamics of Change: The Example of the Adamma Masquerades

In both the north central and central regions of Igboland is found a mask type known as the maiden spirit. In the Nsukka areas, she is known as *Ikorodo*, in Ngwo areas as *Adamma* and in the Awka area as *Agboghommuo* (*mmanwu*). In all cases, the masquerade outfit is similar except for a few local variations. She is dressed in multicoloured tight appliqué costumes, has a small face with delicate but symmetrical features and carved hair coiffure. Only among the Igbo of Awka is the mask headdress carved as a complex open work head structure dramatized with rhythmic symbols painted in bright colours for kinetic effect.

While these mask types seem to reflect traditional models of beauty, however, there are noticeable traces of change more especially among the Ngwo Igbo. Such a change is found in the *Adamma* masquerade known for her intricate dance steps which are now transformed into disco-type dance movements, quick and energetic, almost to the point of mesmerizing the audience not to speak of her delicate facial features painted with enamel pigment for mimetic effects. The original coquettish dance steps have given way to overt mannerism of a city girl which she now impersonates through mask theatre. These noticeable changes in *Adamma* are absent in other maiden spirit variants in Nsukka known as *Ikorodo*. The reason may lie in the fact that the *Adamma* masquerade is located in close proximity to Enugu urban centre as a channel of urban transformation on this mask type and thus re-configures the Igbo ideal of beauty-in the modern context.



Fig. 1

(A) **The Ekwe Masquerade**

Ekwe is a monumental Masquerade among the Northern Igbo community. This great masquerade in the frontier of the society with supper head structures in a shared platform has been described by scholars thus:

The dances of towering, multfigured Ekwe masks South of Nsukka the similarly majestic and stately, similarly challenging because of their immense weight. Many villages own two or three of these large composite wooden structures, which appear in turn at annual dry season festival and funerals of important people. Of the three Ekwe in Ugbene, the two largest are considered female the slightly smaller one is a male spirit. All are constellation of human and animal figures analogous to those on Ijele, though with fewer masked spirits. (Cole and Aniakor 1984:142).

In addition, they observe that *Ekwe* body costumes, are more visible, and much more elaborate, than those worn by *Ijele* carriers who are largely hidden. Here tailor's arts reach a high technical level, with elaborate sculptural groups animals and humans stuffed and applied, hanging off the costume at the front and back. These overloading embellishments, like the huge headdress itself, were probably created in response to inter village competition. (Ibid, 1984:142).

It is, however, in the *Ekwe* towering super structure that one can detect and analyse the various intersections of tradition and modernity with a view to identity the effects of modern transformation on the *Ekwe* masquerade. This is evident in the constellation of numerous symbols with which the superstructure is embellished. These range from animal to human symbols in their thematic variations.



Fig. 2

Their sequence can be noted, namely:

1. The king with a fanciful crown - said to be the Attah of Idah (Idah King),
2. A man carrying a radio-symbolises the effect of urban acculturation.
3. Maiden dressed in modern outfit-again the effect of urban transformation.
4. Maiden adorned with Uli designs and other waist-beads (jigida)-symbolizes Igbo ideal of beauty.
5. Maiden exhibiting different traditional hair style-symbolizes maidenhood.
6. Heraldic Angel - symbolic of Christian values and acculturation.
7. Pregnant woman decorated with ivory armlets symbol of fertility of female womb, growth and continuity.
8. Hunter wearing helmet carrying a leopard and a gun in both hands-symbol of male valour and heroism.
9. A cyclist (motor)-symbolic of wealth and prestige, in an urban milieu.
10. Several maidens shown as *Ikorodo* dancers-symbolic reference to the ideal of maidenhood.
11. Maiden, carrying a bowl on her head and an umbrella in her hand-symbolic of the ideal of maidenhood in ceremonial context.
12. Other decorated wood support panels-not symbolic but merely structural in function.
13. Maiden in a kneeling position-probably symbolic of a ritual occasion, possibly female initiation.
14. Colonial official wearing a helmet and boot-symbolic of colonial influence and authority.
15. An airplane and a pilot-modern symbol of power and prestige.
16. Mother with twins-fertility of the female womb, general fruitfulness, growth and continuity.
17. Nursing mother-symbolic of the ideal of motherhood and family breeding.
18. Mammy-wata (River goddess) - An Europeanized motif, derived from the 19th century coastal trade.
19. Several other carved maiden figures dressed either in modern or traditional outfit-symbolic of the intersection of tradition and modern acculturation.

Some Symbols on Ekwe Headress

Fig. 3



Fig. 4



It is obvious from the exploration of the iconicity of the *Ekwe* masquerade that many of the symbols make simultaneous references to tradition and change, ancestral legacy and modern transformation. This extends to the *Ekwe* sculptural style of stylized realism, use of factory pigment and ultimately to the expanding cosmos of the village which has become readily receptive to change and modern transformation in the overall mask headdress configuration.

Another aspect has to do with two *Ekwe* masquerades both of which are of female gender. The smaller Version was first carved. However, with increasing wealth and general prosperity, the owning village commissioned a more elaborate and monumental *Ekwe* type. What both share in common is the presence of a towering mask headdress embellished with numerous carved symbols and painted in polychrome for dramatic effect and as a visual ideation of Igbo cosmos. Beyond this, the bigger version is a near parallel to Igbo Ijele mask (Aniakor 1978; Herderson and Umuna 1988) or even the Mbari shrine temple (Cole 1986).

Yet quite fascinating is the alteration of identity between the two *Ekwe* masquerades. Thus, to satisfy the need for spectacle, the two masquerades, though female in gender have been re-classified into female and male gender, namely:

- a. *Oke Ekwe* (male *Ekwe*),
- b. *Nne Ekwe* (female mother masquerade).

In the metaphoric sense, the second *Ekwe*, has become the mother of the first *Ekwe* by which it has become male in keeping with the Igbo principal of binary ideation (things are in twos) (Cole and Aniakor (1984).



Fig. 5

Oriokpa Mask Performance and the Audience

Traditional yam and commemorative festivals are increasingly being displaced by Christian festivals such as Easter, Christmas and New Year probably because members of the mask audience have all converted to Christianity, as such, traditional festivals have given way to Christian festivals just as what was a traditional mask audience has been replaced by a modern acculturated audience, also traditional patronage has replaced by a modern one. Anyone can now commission a mask form, and mask performances are prepaid for. Mask dance ethos has also disappeared. Audience members though they still reside in villages engage in menial occupation which takes them daily to the town from which they have imbibed modern secular value, in turn, traditional performance spaces in the villages have been displaced by modern performance spaces in the towns. Rural audiences that circulated through the pathways in the villages in search of masquerades for entertainment have now moved to towns where they show off newly bought dresses on Sunday afternoon. Because of this, the oriokpa masquerade have abandoned the village and followed their audience to town for closer theatrical encounters. These whipping masquerades perform along the streets from which they chase people into nearby compounds in a deliberate attempt to whip them which seldom succeed. Nevertheless, mask chase after the audience provides aesthetic warmth and excitement. Mask theatre has been subject to modern transformation which also secularizes both masquerade and dancer and erases traditional ideas about masking mystery.

Conclusion

What this paper has done is to draw attention to the study of masking within matrix of change and transformation by focusing on important aspects of Ngwo-Nsukka Igbo masking. These are the maiden spirit known as *Adamma*, the monumental *Ekwe* masquerade and the performance orientation of *Orikpa* masquerade. The analysis of data shows clearly that urbanization and modernization have had their effects on Igbo cultural and masking institutions from mask type to mask identities and performance context, mask headdresses and costumes. These factors encompass traditional and modern realities in Igbo masking. One cannot be separated from the other. It is their dynamics and transformation that underscore Igbo masking as a cultural phenomenon or a multi-media event.

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