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OGUAMALAM MASQUERADE PERFORMANCE BEYOND AESTHETICS

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ABSTRACT

Masquerade in its form, style, costume and performance has remained an indispensable art in the African society. At times, people misinterpret masquerade performance to be barbaric, mundane and something to be avoided. This misinformation has raised a lot of unanswered questions on masquerade performance and its essence. This paper, therefore, aims at presenting in an unbiased way, the idea behind masquerade performance in Africa. It will explore how it goes beyond aesthetics and mere entertainment, to motivate people in appreciating their culture and the tradition that brought it into being. In order to actualize the interpretative and communicative potency in masquerade and its performance, qualitative method of analyzing data using content analysis will be used to x-ray Oguamalam Mmanu Performance of Erim community in Imo State.

Keywords: Communicative essence, Interpretation, Masquerade and Oguamalam Mmanwu.

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Contribution/ Originality

This paper finally documents and sustains the mythological belief system imbedded in oguamalam masquerade performance of Erim community.

1. INTRODUCTION

The masquerade tradition is an ageless practice in most African Communities. It enjoys among other things, durability and continuity over time made possible by family and communal inheritance of the art, craft, magic and culture of masquerade through generations. Molinta (2014) (34) observes that: Masquerades plays very significant roles in the people's belief system influencing and shaping theater personal view as well as their social universe. [25]

In African society, masquerades serve a complex diversity of social purposes. Within an indigenous traditional settings, each masquerade performance usually has a principal as well as number of subsidiary purposes, which may express or reflect the communal values and social relationship of the people. Harper (1997) (56) observed that:

Many African masquerade bases on its religious mythology believed on a bond of continuity between the living and the dead ancestors, who, in some culture return as masquerade performer to guide and judge the living. [36]

In African cultures, masquerades are used to assist adolescents to become responsible adults, to foster good health and well-being, to assist the elderly in preparation for death and to teach independence between the environment and the community. Susan Toole (2008) (67) argues that: 'The African people have kept their cultural traditions and belief alive through their art, myths, legends, folktales, rituals, prayers, proverbs and song. (64)

Masquerade phenomenon based on its potency and cosmology in Africa is as old as man. The indigenous African society holds masquerades in high esteem. The masquerade in its totality is one of the sacred and secrete cult in indigenous African society. Dominic Uzoma (2009) (89) posits that: In indigenous African setting masquerade display is beyond mere exhibition of aesthetic costume, rather based on cosmic totality masquerade serves as the interconnecting rod between various "chi's in Igbo land. (44)

In Africa especially in our indigenous society, the masquerade art is sacrosanct irrespective of the category the masquerade belongs to. The African indigenous masquerades based on their cosmic essence can be categorized under mystic, mythical, and thaumaturgy entities with different functions, thoughts and ideological manifestations, Illah as cited by Egwuda – Ugbeda (2014) (45):

Among the indigenous African community, masquerade thrives on the myth that a balance must be maintained in the relationship between the living and the dead. Some parts of Africa mythology believe in the celebration of life and this relationship is found in the masquerades. Primarily, masquerade is believed to be a vehicle of expression of the ancestors as they continue with the desire to participate in the activities of the living. (148)

In Africa, the sociological potency of the masquerade portrayed symbiotically, shows the various functions of the masquerade. Some masquerades perform spiritual, political and social functions, while some based on semiotic interpretation placed on their style, form or names which are used to entertain the people. Egwuda – Ugbeda (2014) (74) argues that:

Masquerade performances are re-entertainment of the people's spiritual and social lives. In their spiritual lives, people re-enact the actions of their ancestors, these are effectively represented by the masquerade performance. (130)

Generally in Africa, the identity of the masquerade/masquerader is a closely regarded secret since the masquerade is essentially not regarded as a living being, because they are believed to have emerged from the ground or unknown destinations.

1.1. The Cosmology of Masquerade Performance beyond Aesthetics

In Africa culture, the masquerade embodies the spirit and human world. The mysticism surrounding the masquerade is one of the key components of the indigenous culture that survived western influences. Bayo (2011) (67) maintains that:

Ancestral belief and worship has become a kind of religious activity in Africa. Masquerades are the ancestors that came back to life. Their voices are guttural, different from that of the living, almost every family worship ancestors in one form or the other. (24)

The mythological belief system of indigenous Africa masquerade is in its performance and not aesthetics. A lot of misinterpretation as has been placed on the originality, uniqueness and informative essence of indigenous African masquerade performance. The high level of misinterpretation seems dangerous due to lack of knowledge or poor understanding of what masquerade performance entails beyond its aesthetics of costume, chants, and stylized dance display. In the course of this paper, what should always be the motivating aim during any masquerade performance such as *ogumalam masquerade* is the (IDEALIZATION). It is the critical dissecting of the idealization of any masquerade performance that presents it as something: good, communicative or barbaric. Femi Agu (24) observes that: The African masquerades have everything to do with ceremonies either purely for ritual, initiation and burial rites.

In African cosmology during masquerading, its performative state is always opposed with the 4W questions of: What, When, Where and Why. However, an interpretative x-ray on these 4w questions during performance helps to portray the fact that masquerade performances are far beyond mere aesthetics. Akas (2013) (12) maintains that:

It is the performative essence of masquerades both in make-up, style, forms and chants that differentiate indigenous masquerades communicatively from each other at any given performance. (24)

To non-Africans, the sight of a "masked man" might be interpreted to mean a simple disguise, an eccentric or in fact, a clown catching his fun; but to the African based on cosmological belief system, masking is a serious engagement that requires not only mental and physical aesthetics but also, spiritual fortification. Asigbo (2012) (23) This is because ancestral masks or spirits are not mere human beings but manifestation from the spirit realm of the ancestors and other disembodied being seeking communion with morals. Asigbo (2012) (45) supported this view by adding that:

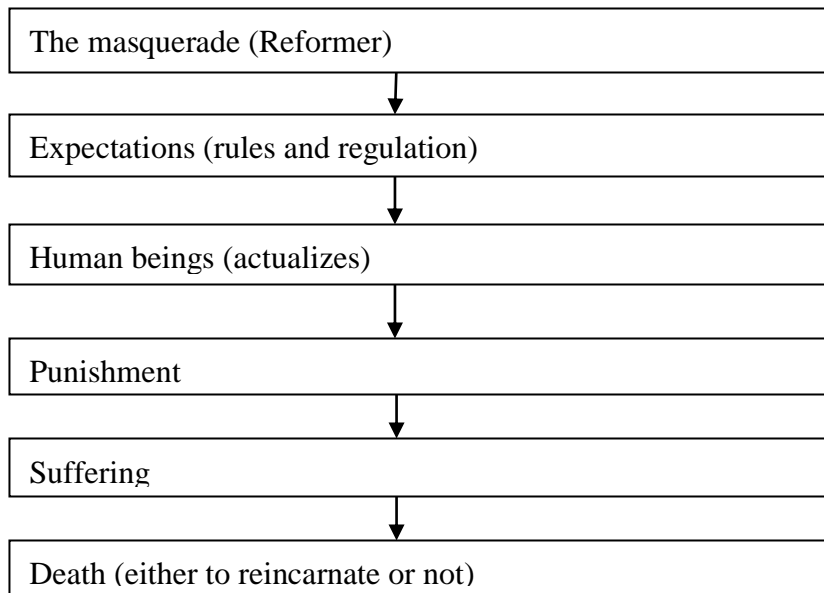
Masked spirits depending on their purpose and function possess attitudes ranging from spiritual (in) sight, clairvoyance agility, and unusual strength and so on. Spirit manifests command ultimate respect not just because of their ethereal presence but because they are believed to embody supernatural wisdom, strength and purity. (2)

Masquerade performance in Igbo land such as Erim community in Imo state is inextricably linked with the aspect of Igbo view that stresses the interaction between the world of the living

and world of the dead. Related to this is the Igbo belief in ancestral worship, observance of rites of passage, reincarnation and existences of good and bad spirits.

The cosmic state of masquerade during their performative state always follows a semiotic chronological order such as;

When all these are critically understood by the people that own the masquerade, then the re-appreciation of masquerading as a communicative tool will be accepted.



1.2. Reasons for Interpreting Masquerade Performance

Some people have really misinterpreted the communicative essence in masquerade performance without considering the factors that contributed to the existence of such performance. Based on this, a lot of scholars have tried to give various communicative interpretations on masquerade performance such as:

- a. Masquerade performances aid the people and participants to understand and see its performance as not just a piece for entertainment but a piece that communicates in-depth messages to the people and an art which could satirize or mirror a people.
- b. The interpretation of masquerade performance in Africa goes beyond the masqueraders' ability to move the body to a rhythm or music but as an art work of expressive communication.
- c. Masquerade performance in core African setting aids in understanding the socio-cultural phenomenon of a people.
- d. A good understanding of masquerade performance gives its owners a sense of pride as it relates to them directly and exposes to them their history, phenomenon and belief.

1.3. Brief History on Oguamalam Masquerade Performance in Erim Community in Imo State

Oguamalam Masquerade is an indispensable and ageless masquerade in Erim community in Imo State. The masquerade according to history by Mazi (2014) (Interviewed on August 8, 2014) was believed to have emerged both in its form, performance style and name during a symbolic period in Erim. The symbolic period was the period some of the married women of Erim community married outside finds it very difficult to conceive after years of being in their husband's house. This singular act of delay in giving birth gave the community a bad name and their young innocent ladies found it difficult to get married. Based on this, a lot of Erim women and their elders decided to look for "a black goat in day time before it gets late" by trying to find solution to the existing problem at hand. A lot of women have tried consulting other 'Chi's' without considering their own masquerade called Oguamalam. When they had tried other means to no avail, they decided to consult this great masquerade. This masquerade is seen and believed to always be the last solution to any difficult issue in the community. The masquerade is believed to respond to people's problem which earned him nickname such as god of hopeless, god of magic, god of attack and god of money talking . But Igbo cosmology and its sacredness, women are not allowed into the masquerade cult, but any female child born during the festive period of Oguamalam masquerade performance in August-September becomes an initiate. The masquerade based on its semiotic interpretation is far beyond the superficial understanding of its name such as:

1.4. Ama-Akwa (The Gossip Cry)

This is a very symbolic ritual carried out by women before going to sacred shrine of Oguamalam masquerade called "Ulo – Mmanwu" (The house of the masquerade). This AmaAkwa is the symbolic presentation of any woman or women who finds it difficult to conceive after years of marriage in her husband's house. The women through "Ama-Akwa" come before the shrine of the great to present their problems, worries and confusion seeking for positive assistance. For the required assistance to be achieved, the woman or women must undergo series of ritualistic cleaning and purification. Inside the sacred "UloMmanwu" of the masquerade, there is a sacred stone seen as stone of complain by name Ama-Ofor. The symbolic function of the Ama-Ofo stone is like a staff of office, where the woman or women lay their complaints and ask the great masquerade to fight for justice on their behalf. The hitting of the stone by shrine attendant on the floor symbolically shows- the readiness for action by the masquerade. For the action cum feedback to be effective, the woman or the women must be sure that their hands are clean and if found not guilty of the offence, she will deliver immediately after three symbolic market days. But if the husband is found guilty, he would be terrified in his dream by the masquerade to stop cheating and be a good husband.

1.5. Costume

The costumes used by the masquerade, the shrine attendant and even the women coming to lay their complaints are very symbolic. The costumes are very symbolic in the sense that the various colours worn by the people mentioned earlier communicate beyond combination of aesthetically attractive colours. It is believed in Erim community that each of the colours semiotically reminds the entire community the situation of things going on at that particular moment, both in expression, reactions and feedbacks. Those symbolic colours and their interpretations are as follows:

1.6. Women Putting on Sided Colour Costume Black/Red

This two sided colour costume black/red worn by the women while going to shrine is called “akwa-nzu” and it very symbolic, symbolic because the colour on it has a positive information to pass across. The black costume of the costume shows the confused, worried and helpless state of the woman at the time of their childlessness. So they seriously want the Oguamalam masquerade to intervene. With the aid of the symbolic colour the person wearing it is expected to look unkempt without any make-up or smile on her face which interpretatively shows total rejection and needs a quick response. Once any woman is seen in such costume in the village, the indigenes will start empathizing with her saying-Oga di mm ajidesi obi giike (it will be fine, just be firm).

The red side of the costume signifies the immediate danger that awaits the woman such as: sending her back to her parents, wanting to marry another wife or threatening to present her before deities either to testify her innocence or be killed. This level of unforeseen danger is determined by the shade of red worn, if the red colour is not deep red, it simply means the danger is not yet so serious. However, in a situation whereby the colour of red on the costume is deep red it simply means either the deed has been done or it will be done soonest. So these two symbolic colours determine the responses from the great masquerade.

1.7. The Costume of Shrine Attendant Called – Nwa-Uzo

The costume of the shrine attendant is very symbolic. The symbolic colour of the costume is brown and he is always squatting and he doesn't look at the complaints face or faces. The colour brown according to [Jude Akamere \(N.d\)](#) Akamere in an interview on 16th August, 2014) symbolically portrays the unclear nature of the complaints being made to Nwa-uzo (shrine attendant) who serves as the connecting link between the women and the unseen – masquerade. The colour also reminds the attendant how disturbed the women or woman might be, so they need his quick mediation. [Jude Akamere \(N.d\)](#) (in an interview 2014) also said because of the symbolic nature of the colour brown, nobody is allowed to visit the shrine with any cloth that has brown on it, but if one disobeys, he/she will face the wrath of the masquerade. The squatting style of the shrine attendant inside symbolically portrays him as mere mediator and has no right to see or question the people he is mediating for. At this point he meant to listen more than

talking. According to Jude Akamere (N.d) Mr. Akamere,(in an interview) it is an abomination for him (the shrine attendant) to see the face or faces of the people seeking for help , if he do he will face the wraths of the gods which is instant madness or death. This simply portrays the sacredness of the shrine.

1.8. The Costume of Oguamalam Masquerade

According to EMENIKE Akamere (2014) (in an interview), the masquerade has several symbolic costumes both seen and unseen ones , but the popularly known costume is the costume that is pure white but with some other colours like red or black mixed with it. These two symbolic colours when interpreted are very important in enhancing the communicative potency of costumes during masquerading. The pure white costume is been worn by the masquerade after its metaphoric search to declare the final verdict from the gods. If the woman is not guilty, the masquerade appears with the white costume but his face will be fully masked, showing she will conceive soon. In a situation whereby the woman is found guilty, the masquerade appears with a pure white but with tiny colours of red and black on it. The pure white simply shows she will deliver a baby but she will pay for her unfaithfulness to the husband. The level of the punishment is determined based on the size of tiny colours. If the sizes of the colours are very tiny, semiotically it shows that the punishment will not be much, but if the colours are big sized, it shows that the woman in question will undergo series of spiritual cleansing and purification before she will conceive again. These symbolic-communicative colours make Oguamalam Masquerade a unique masquerade during performance.

1.9. Drums

The drums used during the performance are highly sacred and addressed as '*udu-chi*'. The *udu-chi* emerged as the name of the drums through a symbolic means. It was believed to have emerged through a man called "Okebaram", According to the history of Erim as narrated by (Chief O. Ofokor),there was a man, Okebaram who lived for years with his wife without any children of their own and a lot of people advised him to divorce his wife and marry another wife. However, "okebaram" kept believing that one day, the gods of Erim will see them through. So one faithful evening because he was into artifact, he then decided to design a wood object inform of a drum. He designed the drum and allowed it to stay outside for three day. After the third day, Okeabaram told the wife that since they don't have a child, let them keep dancing and singing for their ancestors until the day they will be remembered. It was recorded that after the dance that same evening, Okeabamara's wife had a child. This symbolic story on the drums used for the performance called *udu-chi* is still in existence till date. The name "*udu-chi*" came from Okeabaram exclamation – *Ewo!!!udu-chi enye-alamrwa* (Ha! The sacred drum of the gods has given me a child). Till date in Erim people believe so much in the drums.

1.10. Songs/Chants

The songs/chants used during the masquerading performance are very communicative based on the contextualization of the songs/chants. The content of song/chant symbolically reminds or reflects the situation of things in the community (Erim) especially before, during and after the various seasons/festive periods in the community. Based on this, the audience understands the thematic potency of the various songs/chants sang at any given time. The communicative – thematic effectiveness of the songs/chants are classified under various interpretative sub-heading such as:

1.11. Akwa-Ike (The Cry of strength)

This type of song/chant is used during the masquerade performance especially when a renowned member of the cult dies and he is about to be buried. The singer chronologically recounts the deeds, life style and weakness of the deceased when he was alive. It is symbolic interpretation of the songs that awaken the conscious mind of the audience to know whether the deceased who is a member of the cult lived a good life or not. The rhythmic singing of the songs/ chants is considered indispensable during the performance because of its stylized communicative rendition from a low pitch to high pitch . The low pitch tone is the moment when the singer is narrating the deceased's weak point which is not supposed to be heard by non-initiates, while the high pitch tone is moment where the singer is praising the deceased for his good deeds.

1.12. Egwuo-Ada (The Song of Great Ada)

This is another symbolic song/chant imitating any woman in the community that was born on the day of this performance. Any female-child born after the intervention of the great oguamalan masquerade will be initiated into the masquerade cult in future. However, before the initiation ceremony, the singer will use the song called '*abu-ije*' to recount the good deeds of the *oke-ada* in her husband's house. If found worthy, then she will be fully initiated and named-*ugomba*

1.13. The Performance Arena

This is the most indispensable place during the performance. It is called "*Ama-ndu*" where their ancestral fathers was initiated into the performance. The "*Ama-ndu*" as fondly called, symbolically means the square of last resort. , no matter the degree of someone's worries and problems, once his/her hands are clean as a member of the community oguamalam masquerade will surely fight for justice on his/her behalf. Indigenes naturally believe that when one steps into that masquerade arena all one's problems are solved.

2. CONCLUSION

The masquerade and masquerading of today have gone beyond aesthetics. The masquerade performances of various communities semiotically interpreted have various functions to perform. Based on this, people should desist from addressing any masquerade as mere mask by people worn rather they should make effort to research, investigate and understand the socio-mystic essence surrounding the emergence of masquerade. In conclusion, masquerade like Oguamalam when based interpretation on its semiotic potency is highly communicative beyond aesthetics.

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