EXPLORING THE THEATRICAL AESTHETICS OF *EKWE* AND *IGANYA* MASQUERADES IN IGALALAND

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Abstract

Masquerade institutions continue to play a vital role in many societies, serving as a means of cultural expression, social critique, and community building. This study therefore seeks to Explore the Theatrical Aesthetics of Ekwe and Iganya Masquerades in Igalaland. The methodology used to gather data is the survey research method. Both primary and secondary sources were used for data collection. Findings reveals that the presence of costumes, masks, music, dances, among others in the performances of these masquerades makes it theatrical and a beauty to behold. The study concludes that, masquerade institutions are an essential part of community life in many African cultures and the beauty of the rich African cultural heritage can be shown through masquerade performances such as Ekwe and Iganya masquerades. Based on the above conclusion, the study recommends among others that, indigenous performances like masquerade performances in Igala land should not be banished into the fetish realm, rather, it should be held with utmost importance especially those that are sources of economic empowerment to the performers and even to the government through tourist attraction.

Introduction

African traditional theatre is born out of African traditional religion. To Africans, religion and culture are not two different phenomenon as aspects of culture are buried in religion and aspects of religion are also deeply rooted in their culture. Thus, to an African man, religion is culture and culture is religion. This justifies Mbiti assertion that "to the people of Africa, religion is life and life is religion" (10). A characteristic of traditional African societies is that they do not separate consciously the various aspects of life and social behavior into discrete compartment. African Traditional culture could simply be the indigenous way of life of the African people, which involves the way of worship, the way they dress, talk among others.

Although there are some similarities in the religion of most African communities because they believe in God as a supreme being, the existence of man, the universe, life and life after death, the power of deities, the idea of sacrifice, rites of passage from childhood to adulthood and ancestral ties (Boston, 1968). The cultural norms and values of the African people are embedded

in their religious activities, it is this religious life that forms the foundation for theatrical practices and performances across the continent.

Africa as a continent and indeed Nigeria as a nation are an embodiment of wide array of theatrical practices. This is largely due to the presence of numerous cultural activities such as dance, mime, ritual, masquerade, festival, coronation, storytelling, myths, initiation, ceremonies, celebrations, music (songs), puppetry and chants that serve as part of religious worships and civil observances among Nigerian communities.

These performances in their diverse and unique arts have given birth to drama and theatre in Africa and also in other parts of the world. For instance, the origin of Greek theatre is traced to the Dionysian festival of the Greek people. Oscar Brockett observed that: "the Greek are usually considered to be the primary originator of theatre, for it was they who first developed the form as it was to be known in the western word" (5). What this implies is that the theatre, not only in Greece, but elsewhere around the world is rooted from the religious activities that are akin to the respective societies. In Africa there are indigenous cultural performances that are theatrical, these includes; festivals, masquerade performance, music, puppetry, storytelling, coronation among others.

The plethora of festivals and masquerade performances like Egungu, Osun, Ogun, Olua of the Yorubas, Omabe, Odo, Ojiyi, Mbom Ama of the Igbos, Alekwu of the Idomas, Kwagh-Hir of the Tiv, Ocho, Egwu, and Okula of the Igala are said to be deeply rooted in the religion of the people but also form the background of their drama and theatre. In many communities in Africa today, except those already totally overrun by foreign religions, traditional performances (festivals, coronations, rituals, masquerades,) are staged from time to time. These performances are part of the culture, social, political and religious life of the people, each with a strong socio-political, economic, religious and cultural significance on the lives of the people.

This study falls within the ambiance of traditional African theatre as it examines the theatrical aesthetics the Igala which is an aspect of African theatre and drama. The above view is supported by the assertions of J.A. Ebong that:

> Traditional African theatre is the oldest and most indigenous form of theatre in Africa, and comprised communal events in the form of myths, rituals, imitations, festivals, celebrations, masquerading, puppetry, ceremonies, etc., cosmology of the African society. Its drama has no literary textual tradition and its authorship is therefore believed to be communal and unknown (2).

Masquerade institution which is central to this study is in the category of African theatre described above because its origin is deeply rooted in the cosmology of the Igala society. It is based on the above foundation that this study sets out to explore the theatrical and aesthetics of *Ekwe and Iganya* masquerades in Igalaland.

Conceptualizing Masquerade

Literally, scholars have defined masquerade as a covering, concealment and a disguise device by an individual or group with the view to represent a spirit, an animal, philosophy or an idea; while they consider that costumes associated with masquerades as the physical representation of this disguise. This definition contradicts completely the view of most African societies of masquerades and their costumes. Perhaps, this is the kind of challenge that makes Tom Miachi to says that:

> In the context of Africa, the term, "masquerade" seems to have been care-freely, and, indeed, carelessly used by Europeans and Americans and those social scientists trained by them, such that the real meanings of the concept they are attempting to portray become elusive and the representative terms assume derogatory and wrong meanings and connotation. (14)

However, in most African societies, masquerades are associated with ancestors, goodwill and governance. They defended and safeguarded society and accordingly prevented all potent threats to their existence and that of related Institutions. Miachi sums it up that:

> On linguistic structures, some anthropologist have shown that the incarnate being phenomenon, in theory and practice, cuts across cultures. The phenomenon is called *eku* in Ebira, *egwu* in Igala, *alekwu* in Idoma, *egwugwu* in Asaba, *egungun* in Yoruba and *gunnu* in Nupe. The suffixes, *ku*, *kwu*, *gu*, and *gwu* found in these conceptual names which means "death", "corpse" or "incarnate being" are common to Africa's linguistic group. These words and their derivatives have often provided the bases for discountenancing "ethic" models for the study of art traditions and looking beyond mere physical characteristics, to consider other cultural parameters and variables in socio-cultural analysis. (19)

From the above, it is clear that Africa and the Africans perceptions of the masquerades are completely different from the view of their European counterparts who limit the masquerade to objects of pleasure and entertainment. This is because while to the western world, anything under a mask can pass for a masquerade, to Africa and the Africans, the masquerade are the dead ancestors among the living, which is hinged on the belief that human life does not end in physical death. It is their conception that life is made up of the body and soul; and the soul is conceived as the spirit; and the soul is also conceived. In this way, at the death of any man, the spirit continues its existence in some indescribable environment, where they also commune with the living. The spirit world is seen as a duplication of life here on earth and spirits transform into persons.

Masquerade Theatre

Theatre is a fusion of activities such as dance, drama, music, mime, choreography, costume and make-up among others. Theatre is a performance before an audience. Encyclopedia Britannica defines theatre as an art exclusively concerned with live performances which the action is precisely planned to create a coherent and significant sense of drama (212). It further stresses that theatre includes every form of entertainment from circus to plays. Theatre is subsumed in a structural performance before an audience. Therefore masquerade theatre is that art of mask performance before an audience for cultural, social, religious or entertainment purposes. Masquerade unfolds to the audience in form of human being who appear as an ancestral or spiritual character. The masquerade put on mead dress known as mask, wear costume, and use props like rattles, gong and stick with the aid of sound from musical instruments such as flute and drums of different sizes. Masquerades performs dance that is rhythmic in response to the music within space and time.

Masquerade theatre is a masquerade show where masquerades perform with the aid of accessories like costume, music, song, props, stage, audience, makeup, etc. that could make its performance theatrical. Masquerade show can be likened to a puppet performance as exemplified in Tiv Kwagh-Hir theatre. Hagher cited in Doki subscribes to the above assertion when he observes that masquerades shows are interchanged with puppet shows (135). This is because each of the shows requires extensive costuming, makeup and arrangements of props in the performance position.

Ethnography and Geographic Location of the Igala People

Igala Land forms the larger part of the Kogi East Senatorial district. It is one of the major senatorial districts in Kogi state, Nigeria. In fact, it is the largest of the three senatorial districts in Kogi State, encompassing nine Local Government Areas. The Local Government Areas in the district include Idah, Ibaji, Igalamela/Odolu, Ofu, Dekina, Ankpa, Olamaboro, Bassa, and Omala local governments. According to Clement Ameh Yaro:

> Kogi East is located in Kogi State, North Central Nigeria. It is a geographical region comprising of nine (9) Local Government Areas; Ankpa, Bassa, Dekina, Ibaji, Idah, Igalamela/Odolu, Ofu, Olamaboro and Omala. The region is located between latitude 6º32′33.8″N to 8º02′44.8″N and longitude 6º42′08.5″E to 7º51′50.3″E. It occupies an area of 26,197 square kilometres sharing boundaries with six (6) states of Nigeria. The population of the region at 2006 is 1,479,144 with a projected population of 1,996,700 at 2016. (23)

The major tribe in Kogi East is Igala. According to Okwoli "Igala is a socio-cultural group among the settlers within the confluence of the two Nigerian rivers of Niger and Benue (2). The name Igala represents the language, the people and the Kingdom itself, and the only form that is being used by the people themselves. As a language, Igala belongs to the Kwa sub-group of

languages with enormous characteristics of Bantu sub-group of the same Niger Congo" (29). The Igala Kingdom is marked politically by its well established central administration before the European expedition in Africa. Igala is situated in today's Kogi state in the Middle-Belt region of Nigeria, and is in fact, the largest ethnic group in the state. They are a people whose social organization and value system are generally similar and who recognize one paramount king as their political ruler. The 1991 population commission of Nigeria projected Igala to approximately 2 million people, which by now (considering the time of writing) could probably be about 3 million. Igala is among the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. Okpe further posits the Igala as a homogenous group which inhabits a geographical area with a common language, which though having various dialects, nevertheless creates no problem of understanding among them. The cultural patterns of life are identical, closely related, based on similar cults and social institutions. Igala traditional religion believes in one supreme God, known as Ojo, who is responsible for everything in this world and the next.

More so, the Igala people have a wealth of experience when it comes to the issue of tradition and culture, which is why many masquerades and cultural activities are found in *Igala* land. Such cultural activities are Ocho festival, Ibegwu, Ogani, Egbe, Ogba, Ogala festivals etc.

Forms of Masquerade in Kogi East

In grouping masquerades either by typology or classifications, one often ask questions like what factors or criteria can be used in grouping or classifying masquerades. According to Miachi, "masquerades can be classified using the basis of ancestry category, society incarnate being and morphological characteristics". (242) He further explains that:

> Ancestry categorization of masquerades involves the origins and etymology of the names as well as oral historical structures. The second category is the social incarnate being which are political, age-set, social control and crowd control incarnate being. Conclusively, the categorization masquerade could also be based on morphological characteristics involves the types of head-dress, type of costumes (fabric) and make of facial coverings. (243)

The Igala Kingdom, situated in present-day Kogi State, Nigeria, boasts a rich cultural heritage, with masquerades (*egwu*) serving as pivotal expressions of its traditions. These masquerades are not mere performances; they embody spiritual beliefs, social norms, and political structures. The following are some of the masquerades in Igala land:

i. The Royal Masquerade

Igalas perceive their masquerades to be an embodiment of their ancestors and the royal incarnate beings. According to Miachi, "Among the Igala people, masquerades are seen as the embodiment of royal dead in the spiritual realm". (247) This is what gives them superior status to all other masquerades. Miachi further gives the list of the royal masquerades in the following order:

> Obajakada, Ekwe, Agbanabo, Epe, Odumado, Ichawula, Ochochono, Ingelekpe, Ikelekwu Afuma, Abilifada, Ujamadeko (also known as Akeke), Ajamaa (also called Oma Ekwe) and Ile enwu'che. The order of superiority among royal incarnate beings is strictly observed especially during their public outings. Since Obajadaka comes out only on very rare occasions, and has not come out since 1955, in most cases Ekwe takes command and is assisted by Agbanabo. When Ekwe himself does not come out, Agbanabo takes charge, with Epe acting as deputy. It is therefore clear that even though the royal incarnate beings occupy high status as a group, within the group there is ranking. (248)

ii. **Ancestral Masquerades**

Ancestral masquerades or *egwu olopu* as the Igala calls them are specifically identified as particular forebearers of the people. According to Miachi, "the *egwu ata, egwu afia, olagenyi* as well as some incarnate beings that are identified with some particular clans or lineage are known examples". (247) These masquerades are owned by only a few clans in Igala land.

iii. The Hunter's Masquerade

Hunters' masquerades are masquerades that celebrates the prowess and valor of hunters in Igala society. Typically performed during hunting festivals or rites. The masquerade's performances often include re-enactments of hunting expeditions, symbolizing bravery and the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. This masquerade embodies warrior spirits and is performed during times of community threat or in historical war commemorations. The masquerade's energetic and fierce dance routines symbolize the community's bravery and resilience, serving as both a reminder of past valor and a spiritual force against evil.

iv. Social Masquerades/ Dancing Masquerade

These masquerades perform functions that are social in nature. Here again, the royal masquerades (egwu-atta), by virtue of their high status and by virtue of the political basis of their existence and function in the monarchical set up fall into this category. The age-set masquerades owned by organized age-set associations with socio-economic thrift goals, also fall into this group. The masquerades commonly owned by age-sets and who perform social functions are include; *Owuna, Agbaka, Egwu agwe, Egwu igba, Eka, Ojonigwu, Ajamadede, Egwu iga*, that is, those with rope-woven costume (for example,Iduku and Agana at Adumu near Idah).

v. Ritual Masquerade

These types of masquerades are known as *egwu icholo* and it includes the royal and ancestral masquerades mentioned above. By virtue of their functions, they perform specific rites during funerals ceremonies, annual ceremonies for the dead (*ote-egwu)* and cleansing of the land defiled by epidemics or witchcraft. It has been noted that "masquerades in this class perform one

form of ritual act or the another including the role of *egwu ata* during the *Egwu* and *Ocho* festivals, the ritual washing of the bad body and good body by *akwuchi* and the exorcising rites of *amuda* and *olagenyi". (Miachi, 248)*

Theatrical Aesthetics of Ekwe and Igomaganya Masquerades

Ekwe

This masquerade is said to have had its origin from the time of Ayegba Oma-Idoko. It is regarded as the king of all masquerades in Igala land and treated as such by all masquerades and all Igala. The guiding fact about *Ekwe* is summed up in the words of Chief Ebiloma Anekwu supported by those of Achimugu Ochala as quoted in Miachi (282). In their words: *"Ojima du k'Ata ne, Ekwenugo ne ge"*. Meaning, all respect or glory that the Atta has are also given to *Ekwe*. *Ekwe* can thus be described as the grand symbol of the Atta, and a representation and embodiment of the collective ancestors of the royal clans. *Ekwe* is traditionally kept on behalf of the Atta by the Enefola-Atta, a titled Chief beaded by the Atta. Ekwe is a ceremonial masquerade. It does not perform except during festivals and very special occasions like the visit of VIPs like head of government or their equivalent. *Ekwe's* performance is a fantastic event to behold. This is because of its theatrical elements. According to Jibrin (4) the musical instruments are two wooden drums and a metal gong known as *Oke*. A special song called *Inyadu* is sung during its performance. The sonorous nature of *Inyadu* makes it an amiable delight .The synchronization in song and drums produces a rhythmic music and all initiates dances with the principal Igala masquerade as it moves along the street leading to the Palace of the Agabaidu the Atta Igala. Usually the performance starts in the early hours of the morning from its shrine. As *Ekwe* steps out of the shrine the eight other royal masquerades come to pay homage in order of seniority led by *Agbanabo*. *Ekwe* is accompanied by a smaller masquerade called *Abilifada Oma-Ekwe* (Ekwe's child). The first point of call is the Atta's palace. The peak of Ekwe's performance is at the palace where it dances in grandeur and in its full paraphernalia as the Igala principal masquerade. At the palace of the Atta, the royal anthem is played for the *Ekwe* accompanied by the trumpet and the royal flute (*Okapana*). At this point the *Inyadu* music stops playing. Chant of *Ami-deju* by the palace women praise singers comes on, the same accorded to the Atta. *Ekwe* acknowledges this with a very dramatic dance while it waves its sacred cane at the crowd. The Atta raises his right hand up to acknowledge the performance: *Ekwe* in turn blesses the Atta with its sacred cane indicating a spiritual affirmation by the ancestors. After every performance *Ekwe* returns to its shrine through the same route it came out. By the time the Igala principal masquerade is going back to its shrine mammoth crowds have gathered. This is because the news of its performance has spread through the Idah town and its surrounding villages and many people who have not beheld the masquerade use the opportunity to see it perform. This is the climax of the outing. At this point the musicians are at their best singing the *Inyadu* song and *Ekwe* dances rhythmically back home amidst loud ovation from on lookers and initiates who also participate in the celebration though from a distance because you stand the risk of being whipped if are too close to it. *Ekwe* returns to its shrine backwards like all masquerades bringing to bear its spiritual instinct different from humans.

Ekwe is a very beautiful looking masquerade shaped after an animal known as *Inyakulugbe* in Igala or porcupine in English. According to Jibrin the costume is a mixture of fine fabric and brass metal making it a very unique spectacle (3). *Ekwe* wears a composite costume that is made of attractive and expensive and rare cloth, decorated leather, fine straw that is neatly interlaced as well as ornamental brass and figurines. *Ekwe's* robe is polychromatic and royally gorgeous. Miachi stressed that, part of the props includes a large umbrella for shelter and a large round-edged leather mat about three metres in diameter, which is spread on the ground on which *Ekwe's* stool (*Akpa*) is placed for him to sit (Miachi, 284). He (Miachi) further stressed that the grand incarnate being also holds a special cane about two metres long which is believed to be charged with mystical powers and which he blesses the Atta by symbolically beating him with it at public functions (284). The beating according to informants prevents any evil spirit that may be present in the vicinity of the Atta from harming him. Another explanation for the symbolic caning says that it symbolizes the giving of 'Ibe' (good counsel or good manners) to the Atta.

Ekwe is accorded the same status spiritually like the Atta; He enjoys the privileges of the royal anthem (Odechi), the royal trumpet, (Okakachi), and even the royal greeting and chants. A special song called Inyadu is sung during its performance. According to Jibrin the royal anthem is played for the Ekwe accompanied by the trumpet and the royal flute (Okpana). Ekwe is no doubt the most prestigious masquerade in Igala kingdom owning to the fact that all other masquerade is subject to it.



Plate 1: ***Ekwe, the principal Igala Masquerade***.

Igomaganya

Igomaganya is a short form for the Igala adage that reads "*Igomaganya k'ima n'uchejun".* meaning the sight of a horse is always pleasant to watch. Igomaganya masquerade is a very colourful masquerade and truthfully the sight is not tiring to watch. The view is so pleasant that it

is often said that children who follows it finds it difficult to trace their way back home because they would have covered a lot of distance without them knowing.

The origin of Igomaganya is traced to a clan in Ejule community of Ofu Local Government Area of Kogi State. This masquerade comes out during festive seasons especially during Christmas, New Year, Salah and during the coronation of a new king. It is a peaceful and cheerful masquerade, hence, children and women form a large part of its spectators and followers.

The costume of Igomaganya masquerade is made of different patches of colourful lace material. The colors of the materials are carefully chosen to catch the eye. Inside this colouful lace dress are straws of raffia professionally crafted in a thread like patterns and attached beneath the lace material to give the masquerade a robust look. On the front of the costume are placed small pieces of reflective mirrors that shines and reflects every image placed before it. The head is made of a carved wood painted in three colours, white, red and white. The colors of the carved mask matches with that of the costume, both combining to give the masquerade a beautiful outlook.

In performance, the masquerade is said to always appear from *Ubi'aja* (back of the market), and it makes its way to the centre of Ejule town. Walks straight on the road from roundabout and make its way to Idah road then walks back to the centre of the town walks towards Aloma road and finally towards Ofakaga road. These three points are the three major entry and exit into and from Ejule town. Igomaganya's walk through these three axis is said to reaffirm the unity and peace enjoyed by the people of the community. His movements are accompanied by large audience especially children and women and then the initiates who are always close by it to give or take instructions from the masquerade. The spectators are always kept at a bit far from the masquerade to avoid hindrance on the path of the masquerade.

The musical instruments of Igomaganya masquerade include a metal gong, (*oke*), a talking drum (*ukonga*) and a bell (*ilo*). The beautiful sounds coming from this instruments are accompanied by songs and chants from the women who are usually Igomaganya's praise singers. The songs and chants are done in form of a call and response patterns with the words often words of praises.

The props of Igomaganya masquerade are a local fan and a broom. These tools are held by a close initiate. The local fan at intervals is used to give the masquerade signals as to when to move and the direction to move towards. This is very important as the thick costume and mask makes it very difficult for the masquerade to see clearly amidst the crowd. The broom on the other hand is used as a symbol of strength in unity.



Plate 2: ***Igomaganya masquerade along Idah road Ejule***



Plate 3: ***Igomaganya masquerade on his walk close to central Mosque, Ejule.***

Conclusion

The rich array of masquerade performances in Nigeria and indeed Kogi East (Igalaland) are theatrically inclined. This is so because of the presence of some elements of theatre such as, dance, costume, music, spectators (audience) etc in their performances. The beauty of Igala masquerades sterns from their appearances, music, all through to their performances and the presence of spectators makes it a complete theatrical practice. While masquerades in Igala traditional festivals signifies the presence of the ancestors, the theatrical paraphernalias often give the performances long lasting memories and keeps the people waiting in anticipation for the next outing.

As discussed earlier, masquerades like Ekwe and Igomaganya presence are both pleasing to the eyes because of the theatrical aesthetics attached to their outings. From their costumes to their performances, there exhibit theatrical aesthetics.

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