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## **A Reconstruction of the Idea and Practice of Masquerading among Igbo People of South-Eastern Nigeria**

### **Abstract**

*The study examines the phenomenon of masquerading in Igbo culture. It philosophically explores the cosmology and cultural anthropology of Igbo masquerading, drawing some important implications for which the authors believe they bear on the truth of human existence. It investigates the distortions in and around this Igbo cultural practice against the background of its immanent significance and, thus, attempts to reconstruct it. The paper demonstrates that the huge potential for development inherent in Igbo masquerading outweigh its pitfalls. Igbo masquerading today tends to divide the present generation from the older generation of Igbo. The latter lament that the way masquerading is done nowadays no longer reflects the critical cultural ideals of the people. But, this situation has not been given deserved attention among scholars. The significance of this study, then, lies exactly on its attempt at a theoretical and normative reconstruction of masquerading among the Igbo. The aim of the paper is to critically engage Igbo masquerading with the goal of rescuing it from associated negativities. In the light of the critical Igbo ideals of truth and social justice, the paper proffers the way forward and makes some recommendations. As a philosophical inquiry, the study employs the methods of analysis, prescription and speculation.*

### **Keywords**

existential import, idea, Igbo, masquerade, practice, South-Eastern Nigeria, reconstruction

## **Introduction**

Masquerading is a cultural phenomenon found among different ethnic groups in Nigeria (Africa) and beyond. The Igbo, Yoruba, Igala, Idoma, Efik and Ibibio peoples of Nigeria all have masquerades as a symbolism of the spirit of the dead (Ugwu, 2013). The Esan, Kálábári, Ijaw, Igbira, Ifeku-Ibaji, Ejagham and the Beron similarly have the masquerade institution as an embodiment of the spirit of the ancestors (Akubor, 2016). In short, according to Claire Voon, the culture of masquerading is ubiquitous in West and Central Africa, particularly in Zambia, Benin, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Burkina Faso as well as in African Diaspora, especially in Haiti. For Voon, Africa's masquerade traditions are not likely to go extinct in the 21st Century and probably beyond because of its transformative power. African masquerade costumes, she says, "transform their wearers into spirits, beasts or ancestral beings [...] [adding that] locals young and old across the African continent and African Diaspora still come together to explore the transformative power of full-body adornments – an enduring set of traditions that may surprise some" (Voon, 2016). Masquerading in Africa, therefore, is a socio-cultural phenomenon founded on a religious ideology of ancestor worship. By implication, it is a practice that underscores the peoples' belief in the connection between the living and the dead.

The Igbo name for a masquerade is *Mmonwu/Mmanwu* which is a derivative of *mụọ ọnwụ* (the spirit of the dead) (Asogwa & Odoh, 2021). Accordingly, an Igbo masquerade is thought of as neither a human being nor a spirit (ghost) but as both – somewhat. Onebunne (2019) remarks that the Igbo perceive their masquerades as “semi-human, semi-god” (p. 21). For Chinyere (2018), they are “spirits in the physical realm” (p. 868). Consequently, the cosmology of masquerading functions to continue the celebration of the rites of passage from the living state onto the dead state and back. No wonder, in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe (1994) submits that “a man’s life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors” (p. 114). Conceived thus, masquerading can be said to be an exercise in transcendence: from human to super-human sphere; and, from the dead (latent or inactive) state to the living (manifest or active) state. Thus, in *Arrow of God*, Achebe (2010) says that “the world is like a Mask dancing; if you want to see it well you do not stand in one place” (p. 68). Ultimately, in *There was a Country*, he refers to this ideology as “the art of the masquerade” (Achebe, 2012, p. 64). He employs this ideology to describe the reality of human existence with its change and dynamism in Igbo cosmology. Hence, he emphasizes that:

“The Igbo believe that art, religion, everything, the whole of life is embodied in the art of the masquerade. It is dynamic. It is not allowed to remain stationary [...] the Igbo people want to create these things again and again, and every generation has a chance to execute its own model of art.” (Achebe, 2012, p. 64).

Therefore, masquerade/masquerading, for the Igbo, is an epitome of the Igbo philosophy of life.

In general, the masquerading functions chiefly to entertain, but also to teach, venerate, and to inspire in the peoples all their cherished cultural values, norms and ideals. In this paper, the focus is on Igbo masquerading: its significance, types and functions. The study seeks to do an immanent critique of Igbo masquerading. The Igbo masking tradition confers on the masked figures a level of immunity and latitude to act in a way that they would not have been allowed to act were they not so masked. But, this art seems to have been misconstrued and abused a great deal today. The paper criticizes such abuses against the background of critical cultural ideals of truth and social justice thereby reconstructing the idea and practice of Igbo masquerading.

Igbo masquerading has been studied from various perspectives, including: cultural and religious perspectives (Gore, 2008; Ikwuemesi, 2016); sociological and anthropological perspectives (Asogwa and Duniya, 2017; Ugwu, 2011; Ray and Shaw, 1987; Basden, 1983; Sorel, 1973); aesthetic and theatrical perspectives (Egbuda-Ugbeda, 2003; Kerr, 1995; Nwabueze, 1993; Enekwe, 1987; Ugonna, 1984; Ottenberg, 1975); literary and linguistic perspectives (Okoye, 2010; Aniakor, 1978); musical perspective (Egudu, 1992); historical perspective (Njoku, 2020; Afigbo, 1981); analytical perspective (Onyeneke, 1987). But, no substantial study has been carried out on Igbo masquerading from *critical philosophical* perspective. Umezina and Orajaka (2021) testify that the only philosophical investigation of merit on Igbo masquerading is embodied in Bonaventure Umeogu’s *Ime Mmonwu: A Philosophical Discourse of the Origin and Significance of Igbo Masquerades* published in the year 2000.

This lacuna denies the scholarly world a more comprehensive and critical understanding of Igbo masquerading and alienates from Igbo nation the

normative tools necessary for improving her art of masquerading in the 21st century. Bearing in mind the multidisciplinary nature of critical philosophy, the importance of studying Igbo masquerading from critical philosophical perspective cannot be over emphasized. The link between overall societal values and the behavioural state of the individual and the collective is well documented in the Critical Theory School of philosophy (Ingram, 1990).

The following headings are considered *ad rem* to achieving the objective of this work: Masquerade in Igbo Understanding, The People's Beliefs and Attitude towards Igbo Masquerades/Masquerading, Reasons Some Igbo Are Calling for the Abolition of Igbo Masquerading, The Reasonableness or Otherwise of Sanctioning Masquerading in Igbo Land, The Existential Import of Masquerading for the Igbo, A Critical Evaluation of the Idea and Practice of Masquerading among the Igbo, The Critical Way Forward. These issues are explored using the methods of critical analysis and reconstruction. Recommendations and Conclusion enclose the research aim of the paper.

### **Masquerade in Igbo Understanding**

Nwala (1985) links the Igbo masquerades with magical or mystical force (*ogwu*), the native doctors and the secret societies in Igbo cultural milieu. He reasons that the transformation of human form into a spirit-mask or the transformation of the spirit of dead persons into human form could only have been achieved through *ogwu*. According to Nwala, the ultimate goal of *ogwu* is consistent with the Igbo man's quest for cosmic and social harmony. Thus, for Nwala, *ogwu* functions both as a practical solution and as a conceptual framework. He points out that:

“As a conceptual framework, the concept of *ogwu* is used to explain events and happenings that appear strange to the Igbo mind [...]. If the explanation is not sought in the powers of ‘*ogwu*’, it is alternatively sought in the activities of the deities.” (Nwala, 1985, pp. 66–67).

Accordingly, Igbo masquerade is a cultural mechanism used to explain the mysteries surrounding life and death.

Hence, for him, it is in the context of *ogwu* that one can make any sense of Igbo masquerades/masquerading. So, the Igbo spirit-mask can be seen as an embodiment (or rather, personification) of magical or mystical force (*ogwu*). But, the significance of Igbo masquerades goes beyond *ogwu* hypothesis to remind the Igbo of the complementarities of the body and the spirit, of the world of the living and the nether world, of light and darkness, of hopes and fears. For Njoku (2020, pp. 31–32), this duality (the philosophy of life of the Igbo) permeates every aspect of Igbo person's way of life, constituting, as it were, an invitation to active engagement with life for equilibrium and balance to be achieved internally (within the individual) and externally (within the society and nature).

Nwala (1985, p. 69), however, concedes that the concept of *ogwu* is consistent with the meaning of the word “Igbo” which connotes that which cannot be easily unravelled: the mysterious. Thus, to say that Igbo masquerade is intrinsically linked to magical or mystical force (*ogwu*) is not to say anything new as such. It is akin to saying that Igbo masquerade is Igbo. So, Igbo masquerade is understood as a cultural effort in Igbo identity expression. Igbo masquerade is designed to overcome this magical or mystical force (*ogwu*) that is itself Igbo. The Igbo, through the art of masquerading, tries to overcome himself

– to understand and express himself better as an Igbo. Hence, Igbo masquerading is an exercise in self-transcendence projected unto the cultural terrain. It represents the overcoming of cosmological and social barriers with the goal of achieving spiritual and existential equilibrium in the Igbo lifeworld.

If *ogwu* hypothesis is anything to go by in understanding Igbo masquerade, then it is simply that the spirit mask transcends the ordinary human being onto a figure that one cannot fully unravel – a mystical personality. Therefore, any attempt to regard and treat a masquerade as a human person among the Igbo amounts to a gross act of profanation against the masquerade cult and, by extension, against the entire Igbo tribe. It is viewed as an act of ‘killing an ancestral spirit’ – an offence with far reaching consequences. Achebe (1994) aptly put this point thus:

“One of the greatest crimes a man could commit was to unmask an *egwugwu* [Igbo masquerade] in public, or to say or do anything which might reduce its immortal prestige in the eyes of the uninitiated. And this was what Enoch did ... Enoch had killed an ancestral spirit, and Umuofia was thrown into confusion [...]. It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming – its own death.” (Achebe, 1994, p. 169)

This offence is at once an absurdity and self-stultification; it is a superlative rarity among the Igbo.

Igbo masquerading is the art of evolving and parading such mystical personalities (masquerades or masked entities) for diverse purposes. Igbo masquerades are designed to symbolize animals, spirits, heroes or personalities which invoke a strong and special meaning for the people. In principle, only men are admissible to the Igbo masquerade cults. However, women are not totally estranged from the Igbo art of masquerading. The masks worn by some masquerades in Igbo land may be carved in the form of beautiful spirit maiden (e.g.: Adada, Adamma, etc). The Igbo masquerade costumes may be procured and designed by women. Moreover, some very elderly women might enjoy partial membership of some Igbo masquerade cults. Other Nigerian tribes are, however, more liberal than the Igbo in allowing women participation in the art of masquerading. Nyam (2017) reveals, for instance, that the Kalabari Ijaw people of the Niger Delta and the Gwandara and Alago peoples of Nasarawa State allow women to participate in masquerade rituals and performances.

The critical question, however, is: to what extent does the foregoing understanding of the concept of Igbo masquerade inform the people’s beliefs and attitude toward Igbo masquerades/masquerading?

### **The People’s Beliefs and Attitude towards Igbo Masquerades/Masquerading**

Among the Igbo, masquerades are believed to emanate from the spirit-world or the land of the spirits; mythically, from ant holes at midnight. They appear in the land of the living in order to achieve some specific purposes. Accordingly, there are designated seasons, and festivals/events during which masquerades may appear. In those periods, the people are charged up by the ferocious and humorous displays of these masquerades. Seasons like harvest period (September/October), Christmas/End of year period (November/December), New Year period (January/February), planting period (March/April) are notable. Major traditional Igbo festivities include: New Yam festivals, hunting and fishing festivals, community anniversary/Founder’s Day

celebrations, Memorials of victories in wars, Burials/Funerals, *Ofala* (coronation) ceremonies, *et cetera*. Nonetheless, Onwuatuegwu (2020) stresses that Igbo masquerades may be displayed for other specific occasions and at some other periods as the community may determine. The masquerades appear in these seasons and events so as to endorse, as it were, the propriety and the inherent goals of the ensuing season as well to honour the village deities, ancestral spirits and associated totems.

Generally, the people regard these masquerades as the socio-cultural *cum* spiritual accompaniments of the seasons/celebrations. The feasts are not deemed as complete without the appearance and activities of the masquerades which may simply run parallel to the occasion and not have any particular role to play in the actual feast proper. The young and the old, male and female “enjoy” the vivacious roaming of the masquerades adorned in different colours of their costumes notably white, black, yellow, red and green. Red signifies energy, vitality and life; black symbolizes a contrast of love and care on the one hand and wickedness on the other; white suggests purity and divinity; green represents youthfulness and abundance of life; yellow invokes the ideas of supernatural forces and joy (Asogwa & Odoh, 2021, p. 20).

Essentially, the people believe that the masquerades are an embodiment of the spirits of their dead relatives and/or their village deities. Hence, the masquerades are not regarded as alien to the people; they are believed to have a particular abstract connection with the people and the community. Onwuatuegwu (2020) explains that in Igbo masquerading, the living members of the community honour their dead elders (ancestors) and the ancestors in turn “compel the living to uphold the ethical standards of past generations” (p. 12). In fact, the masquerades are believed to be the go-between in the to-and-fro interaction between the physical and metaphysical realms of the Igbo cosmos. The fact that Igbo society is patriarchal simply explains why women participation in the Igbo art of masquerading is highly restricted.

The practice of Igbo masquerading is today partly on the decline and partly on the rise. For those who associate it strongly with paganism and anachronism, it is on the decline. But, for those who see in it the call for cultural self-affirmation and self-determination, it may be said to be on the rise. However, both those who think that it is on the rise and those who think otherwise are not oblivious of its many abuses in the contemporary time. The corruption of the institution and practice of Igbo masquerading nowadays forces right thinking Igbo, irrespective of whether they are pro- or anti-Igbo culture and tradition, to demand for its partial or total abolition. This situation deserves a closer scrutiny.

### **Reasons Some Igbo Are Calling for the Abolition of Igbo Masquerading**

Masquerading is primarily a cultural package among the Igbo. But, just like every other aspects of Igbo culture, it is hugely laden with religious undertone. The timing of the emergence of the masquerades is of course ordinarily located within the pagan calendar; and, their appearance is precipitated by some pagan rites and rituals. Moreover, many Igbo-Christians consider masquerading as an instance of the pagan practice of ancestor worship. Hence, Ugwu (2013) remarks that, “the traditional ideating of the masquerades as spirits of ancestors, informs its connection with religious and spiritual ideologies” (p.

19). Consequently, Igbo Christians tend to reject masquerading as an anti-Christian cultural practice. Here, the accusation is that Igbo masquerading is a practice that takes the Igbo society back to the dark ages of her evolution when the Gospel of Jesus Christ and its imperatives had never reached the land.

Furthermore, it has been widely reported and observed that some masquerades end up committing atrocities rather than entertaining or mobilizing the people for wholesome purposes. The critics of Igbo masquerading, in this direction, say that the practice has now been transformed into an instrument of victimization, vandalism and vindication. In an open letter to the governor of Enugu State, Nigeria, on the menace of masquerades in Nsukka cultural area of Igbo land, Asogwa (2021) describes contemporary Igbo masquerades as “masked robbers” owing to their brutality and lawlessness. Asogwa enumerates the ills of these masquerades to include extortion of money, forceful dispossession of people’s belongings, assault on helpless and law-abiding citizens, vandalism of public property, disturbance of public peace and freedom of movement, drug and substance abuse, illegal possession of firearms and other dangerous weapons, as well as victimization of perceived enemies. He, therefore, unequivocally calls for the abolition of masquerading in the area (p. 13).

In short, such masquerades – totally anti-social in their outing – cause any reasonable Igbo to raise serious question marks as to the *raison d’être* of masquerading in Igbo land today. Accordingly, many right-thinking Igbo have called for a total/partial sanctioning of the masquerade institution and its activities by the government, traditional rulers or Igbo community leaders. But, the question remains: Should the idea and practice of Igbo masquerading be rather reconstructed or totally abrogated as nothing but social nuisance and anachronism? Should the idea of Igbo masquerading be sacrificed on the altar of its perverse practices? On what fundamental grounds exactly could masquerading be sanctioned in Igbo land and how?

### **The Reasonableness or Otherwise of Sanctioning Masquerading in Igbo Land**

Igbo people could learn a lot of lessons with great potential for societal development from the art of masquerading. This art is an ancient one with root in the primordial idea of duality. The reference to duality with regards to masquerading indicates that the art of masquerading brings to life in a symbolic manner the possibility that man can always assume either of two faces - real or unreal, genuine or distorted, human or non-human. The entertainment side of the art lies essentially in the effective realization of this possibility. It is a common human experience that sometimes we are not true to our real self. Hence, it is correct to say that one does wear a mask sometimes even without wearing a physical mask. This experience is what Igbo masquerading reminds us from a phenomenological point of view. In short, Igbo masquerading dramatizes the duality of human existence and the possibility of auto-transcendence.

Today, the actions and inactions of the masquerades in Igbo land have become an object of important discussions across the various spectrums of the society. It is pertinent to reiterate here that the art of masquerading for the Igbo surpasses the immediate value of entertainment usually associated with it. Masquerading symbolically draws us into deeper reflections on the place of

the Igbo lifeworld in the global scheme of things. Therefore, it is unreasonable to sanction masquerading in Igbo land; the cultural practice should rather be reconstructed through immanent critique. Cultural reconstruction “entails the re-modelling of cultural practices for various reasons which include meeting current social realities and needs” (Ukpokolo *et al.*, 2018, p. 150). Immanent critique is referred to as a form of critique whose standards are derived from the subject-matter criticized, usually some historically specific cultural ideals (Habermas, 1992).

Habermas (1987a, p. 320) emphasizes that, through immanent critique, one gains emancipatory knowledge: a form of knowledge that involves transformed consciousness on account of insights made possible through critical self-awareness. Such knowledge is emancipatory since one can now at least recognize the correct reasons for his or her problems. Immanent critique is often occasioned by the conflicting and unresolved issues in the lifeworld. In keeping with its German origin (*lebenswelt*), the word ‘lifeworld’ is usually written as one word. It literally means the world of lived experience (Merriam-Webster, 2023). But, Jürgen Habermas, a German Philosopher, uses it somewhat differently to refer to the background of ordinary life

“... given in a mode of taken-for-grantedness that can maintain itself only this side of the threshold to basically criticizable convictions [...] The members of a collective count themselves as belonging to the lifeworld in the first-person plural in a way similar to that in which the individual speakers attribute to himself the subjective world to which he has privileged access in the first-person singular.” (Habermas, 1987b, p. 131)

In Habermas’s two-level theory of modern societies, lifeworld is complementary to the systems. Whereas the systems are steered by the media of money and power, and therefore are functionally organized and explained, the lifeworld is communicatively structured, and subjectively interpreted.

Masquerading should not be sanctioned either in part or in full since that will not remove the inherent human impulse to aberrations and oddities. The focus should rather be on the reconstruction of Igbo masquerading through immanent critique and rationalization of the Igbo society. The rationalization of the human society is achieved through a continued dialogue of the society with itself whereby superior reasons are always sought for and advanced to address current societal challenges (Habermas, 1990, p. 31). So, the process of rationalization of the Igbo society relative to masquerading must include engaging the idea and practice of masquerading with the aim of reconstructing it. It entails solving the challenges of contemporary Igbo masquerading in a manner that is neither utopist nor dogmatic in pursuit of the societal goals of achieving the desired development and promoting human wellbeing.

Igbo masquerading is a symbolic act that far transcends what it purports to represent and which can be leveraged on for the growth of both the individual and the society. It should not be abolished for the art holds a lot of positive implications for human existence. This explains the surreptitious irresistibility of this phenomenon to the Igbo people – both Christians and Pagans alike whether at home or in the Diaspora, alive or dead. In the light of its existential import, therefore, the Igbo art of masquerading should not be sanctioned but rather continually reconstructed and recreated for better results.

## The Existential Import of Masquerading for the Igbo

In modern logic, the expression ‘existential import’ refers to “an attribute of those propositions that normally assert the existence of objects of some specified kind” (Copi, Cohen & McMahon, 2012, p. 190). This applies usually to particular propositions but not to universal ones. To this end, the assertions we have made so far concerning Igbo masquerading is not with reference to all Igbo masquerades but to some of them. More specifically, we use the expression here to refer to the existence of often imperceptible qualities in some Igbo masquerades which underline their social significance and cultural relevance. Thus, the expression is used here in an effort to underscore the distinguishing characteristics of Igbo masquerades.

These characteristics are both practical and ideal insofar as they mirror the qualities Igbo masquerades both represent and embody. These qualities reflect the socio-cultural cum psycho-social/philosophical significance of Igbo masquerading. A deep-seated reflection on these qualities is capable of fostering a positive change of attitude, within Igbo society, towards masquerading especially when they are considered from the point of view of the basic human interest in emancipation both for the individual and the society. In what follows, five of these realities are going to be examined.

### (a) *Igbo Masquerades as Vehicles of Tribal Arts*

The masks used by masquerades, the musical and (human) kinetic displays of the masquerades are all forms of tribal arts, embodying deep aesthetic and symbolic meanings unique to the community that supports the masquerades. G. E. Ekwuru indicates that:

“... the ‘tribal art’ is used to mark geographical boundaries, as it refers to the regions from which the black Africans and their artistic tendencies produced the various forms of arts like music, poetry, dance, drama, sculpture/wood carvings and paintings.” (Ekwuru, 2008, p. 84)

Hence, the masquerade (*Mmonwu*) signifies one of the varied ways in which the African arts may be conceived and represented.

In short, the Igbo masquerade (*Mmonwu*) is an artist in its own right: a tribal artist. Igbo masquerades inspire the feeling of borderline between the world of humans and the world of the ancestors. In embodying these two worlds, the artistic element of Igbo masquerades is such that the facts of the two worlds are at once expressed more or less spontaneously, in keeping with the principle of holism, without caring much about how one is proportionally balanced out with the other. The creativity of Igbo masquerades is assessed according as they are able to project the ideals of Igbo culture and, at the same time, to promote the moral and social values of the community. All their dances, songs, costumes, locutions, actions and inactions are packaged at the background of mythic-religious ideologies that actually underpin the technical manifestations of these visual forms of their art work with the goal of achieving “deeper spiritual interactions between the community and the divine beings” (Ekwuru, 2008, p. 86).

In the Western model of art, the principle of individualism usually prevails; things are first conceived in their individuality, and then subsequently efforts are made to unify and blend them following the criteria of equilibrium, proportionality and symmetry. P. E. Nwabueze (1987, p. 95) asserts that both the African (Igbo) and the Western models of dramatic art have common origin

– ancestral worship and the urge to communicate. The difference, however, lies on the methodology of this communication. While in African (Igbo) model of dramatic art, the participants and observers communicate simultaneously spontaneously; in the Western model, communication goes on consecutively sequentially. Hence, Nnolim (1983, p. 95) insists that the difference is a matter of Mannerism. The intangible artistic element of Igbo masquerades is manifested in enactment of parables and myths.

### ***(b) Igbo Masquerades as Agents of Social Control***

In traditional Igbo society, the communities often resort to the pressures from the masked men in order to enforce difficult decisions say to collect levies, fines, or to deter persons from trespassing onto certain disputed/sacred lands. So, the masquerades are deployed as instruments for asserting political authority. C. C. Aniakor (2002) observes that in Igbo land, particularly in Nsukka area, the council of titled elders called *Oha* and a men's cult called *Omabe* (a masquerade society) occupy the executive (i.e. administrative) arm of the village government with the later championing the maintenance of law and order in difficult areas. Thus, in the traditional Igbo society, the masquerades enjoy a monopoly of coercive power. In Nsukka area of Igbo nation, the *Odo* masquerade (being more formidable in social arena than *Omabe*) goes as far as exercising some legislative and judicial functions. In fact, the *Odo* mask with the associated cult functioned as the supreme legislative and judicial authority during the pre-colonial era (Aniakor, 2002, p. 316).

Be it in adjudication of justice, in administration, in legislation or even in entertainment, these masquerades function as agents of social control by ensuring social and moral stability in the community. This emphasizes one thing about the life and society of the traditional Igbo: that effective socio-cultural reproduction of society is ascribable to the spiritual forces notably the village deities and the ancestors to which the masquerades are deeply connected.

### ***(c) Igbo Masquerades as Markers of Social Structure***

The role of Igbo masquerades as markers of social structures is so important that these spirit-masks may be generally categorized according to the predominant socio-structural functions they perform among the people in a given area of Igbo land. Social structures are patterns of interaction that define a given society as different from the others. These may be complex or simple depending on the size of the group. The group can take the form of the state, the clan, the family, the city or the trade union. But, it is the pattern of interactions that determines them as structural factors of a given society. Making allusion to the interactionist view of society, Goerg Simmel (1950, as cited in Ritzer & Goodman, 2004, p. 166) avers that “society transcends the individual and lives its own life which follows its own laws. It, too, confronts the individual with a historical, imperative firmness”. Yes, it is this ‘life’ of the society that the Igbo masquerades mark. In typical traditional Igbo society, one may speak of ten major groupings of masquerades. Any given masquerade belongs to at least two of the following groupings depending on the social structure of the particular Igbo area the masquerade comes from:

- i. *Mystery Masquerade*. Typical example: *Onyekuluya* – a nocturnal Mask spirit that exposes and thereby condemns deviant social behaviours using songs and, sometimes, jokes. It is common among the Igbo people of

- Enugu (Nsukka) and Anambra states. It is a masquerade *sui generis*. It is a quintessential Igbo masquerade.
- ii. *War Masquerade*. Typical example: *Ayaka* – this serves much like the police in curbing bad social behaviour by pillaging the property of its victim. It is also a night mask and one of the most ancient of Igbo masks. *Mgbadike, Agaba, Udo-akpu-enyi, Odogwu, Otawaraikpo, Okwomma, Odo, Omabe, Akatakpa-Ochi Ajagba, Ekpe, Ekpo, Otakagu,* and *Mkpamkpanku* masquerades are all derivative of this aggressive category. It is common in Nnewi, Ozubulu areas of Anambra State.
  - iii. *Dance Masquerade*. Typical example: *Ogba-ngbada* – this one specializes in dancing aimed at entertaining the people. As expected, it always appears in a stylish outfit with accessories to accentuate its dance. *Adamma, Ngwu, Ekeleke,* and *Oti-Aba* are variants of this dancing type. It is mostly found in Aniocha, Awka, and Njikoka Local Government Areas of Anambra State. *Ekeleke* masquerade is popular in Ndimbara, Owerebeiri, Orlu, Imo State.
  - iv. *Song Masquerade*. Typical example: *Atu-mma* – it functions to mesmerize the spectators with its sonorous songs that often pass strong message about the current realities in the communities as well as the hopes and fears of the people while leveraging on the ideological and philosophical principles that undergird the peoples' attitude to life, the world, and the divine. *Oji-onu, Ngwoke,* and *Omewaluigwe* are variants of this singing type. It is a popular masquerade in Abagana, Ukpo, Adazi-ani areas of Anambra state.
  - v. *Theatre Masquerade*. Typical example: *Okwu-Di-na-Nwuye* – one finds the role of comedy/theatre embodied in this masquerade. It amuses the on-lookers by the dramatic/theatrical exhibitions it stages usually against the background of a typical Igbo family of husband, wife, their children, and perhaps the grandparents. *Ajabu, Ota Ikonte,* and *Okponton Ulogo* are a variant of *Okwu-Di-na-Nwuye* in this context; they are solitary masquerades that satirize the life of bachelors that more often than not tends toward drunkenness, waywardness and laziness. They mock the lifestyle of a loafer and Casanova. They are renegade masquerades that happen to be useful to the extent that they serve to criticize the very style of life they represent. *Ezi-ofia,* and all animal-spirit masquerades (e.g.: *Mmowu Ugo, Mmowu Atu, Mmowu Agu-iyi, Mmowu Odum*) as well as all occupation-spirit masquerades (e.g.: *Mmowu Dinta, Mmowu Otenkwu*) are also variants of this theatrical category. It is common in Uga, Ezinifite, and Aguata areas of Anambra state.
  - vi. *Vigilante Masquerade*. Typical example: *Achikwu* – this masquerade is nocturnal; it prowls round the village at night to fish out perpetrators of evil and abomination and to punish them, especially when the culprits have refused to turn a new leaf. Thus, the spirit-mask functions to beef up security and moral order in the community. There is *Achikwu Ocha* (white) and *Achikwu Ojii* (black). The first is for surveillance; the second, for punishment or execution of criminals. *Achikwu* collaborates with another night mask called *Ogbagu* to perfect its functions. *Awuru,* and *Agummuo* are a variant of this security type. *Achikwu-Ogbaagu* masquerades are popular in Aguata (Amesi, Achina, Akpo, Ekwulobia, Uga, Ezinifite), Orumba North and South Local Government Areas of Anambra state.

- vii. *King Masquerade*. Typical example: *Ijele* – this is the most prestigious masquerade in Igbo land. It evokes the spirit of royalty, nobility, fertility, and a bountiful harvest. *Ijele* is the King and climax of all Masquerades. Thus, the *Ijele* masquerade functions to underscore the nobility and excellence of any occasion especially the political events, burial ceremonies and to arouse the consciousness of how the people must regard the persons/things around whom the event was organized. It is an image-maker spirit mask. *Izaga*, *Adada*, and *Ulaga* are all varieties of this image-making category. This masquerade is predominant in old Anambra state.
- viii. *Magic Masquerade*. This category of Igbo masquerades is known for magic and spell casting. They are potentially dangerous masquerades due to their powers to manipulate nature and invoke bad luck or even death on persons at will. A typical example is *Ekwensu*. Other variants of *Ekwensu* spirit-masks are *Ovuruzo*, *Obiogologo*, *Egbele*, etc. They are believed to be masquerades especially devoted to great traditional spiritualists and the communities of such spiritualists. They are common in *Aronduzuogu*, *Orlu*, *Amesi*, *Ukwulu*, *Ukehe*, and *Afikpo* communities in Imo, Anambra, Enugu and Ebonyi States respectively etc. They make a show of spiritual prowess by performing magic, casting spell, hypnotizing or cursing their kind or other masquerades or even unfortunate persons. *Ajaohia*, *Okonko*, *Enyikwonwa*, *Osimiri*, *Agbeji*, *Omegburunnenanwa*, *Ebu*, and *Ozu* masquerades are also variants of this magical/evil category.
- ix. *Conscience Masquerade*. This category of Igbo masquerades is especially designed to project particular virtues of individual and/or social importance. *Anuforude* spirit-mask, for instance, functions to celebrate and promote the virtue of peace-making. The masquerade preaches about peace and social cohesion in words and deeds. *Iga* is a variant of this peace-loving sub-group. *Aku-ezu-ozo* spirit-mask is designed to project the virtue of the elderly men that maintain strong moral stamina devoid of corruption, shortcuts, and sharp practices. It demonstrates that high moral standards are cherished above wealth and aristocracy in traditional Igbo mores and norms. *Ogunade* is a spirit-mask invented for the appreciation of the value of the youth folk that ensures continuity, vivacity and posterity of the community. *Igariga* and *Isiocha* are variants of this youth's sub-class. *Agulukwa*, *Omewaluigwe* are all members of the conscience category. Masquerades of this category are common in Umuoji, Nkpor and Idemili areas of Anambra state as well as in Nsukka environs of Enugu state.
- x. *General-purpose Masquerade*. This is the defining class of all classes of Igbo masquerades. All Igbo masquerades share in the complementary role of paying tributes to the ancestors (i.e. the dead relatives of the people), and at the same time venerating the gods and deities of the land for enabling the ancestors make their reappearance at that auspicious time among their own people for some sort of communion between them and their living relatives. J. N. Amankulo (2002) maintains that the implicit significance of most traditional Igbo festivities and ceremonies which are heavily punctuated with the performance of the masquerades lies in this very point.

Thus, Igbo masquerades have both general and specific socio-structural functions which they perform simultaneously as explained above. Onebunne (2019, p. 27) prefers to collapse the different forms of Igbo masquerades into

visible (day) and invisible (night) masquerades. Njoku (2020, pp. 53, 59), on his part, splits them into spirit-regarding (upper class) and human-regarding (lower class) masquerades. The spirit-regarding masquerades consist of the violent, aggressive and destructives masquerades that usually carry talisman (*Atikpa* – the power of alchemy) and into which cult membership is highly restricted. Examples: *Okumkpa*, *Egbele*, *Ijele*, *Okonko*, *Ekpe*. The human-regarding category is primarily designed for entertainment. They are less secretive and do not usually carry talisman. Examples: *Atunma*, *Ojionu*, *Ogbangbada*, *Iga*, *Ekeleke*. However Igbo masquerades may be categorized, the fact remains that one can always discern something of the social structure of a people from their masquerades.

It is pertinent to note that Njoku's and Onebunne's dual classifications are respectively apparently based on the structuralist perceptions of the nature and life of the masquerades. But, in classifying them into ten, the authors argue that the structuralist outlook fails to take into account the diverse roles the masquerades play in Igbo socio-cultural milieu. Our ten-level classification typifies these functions. In nowhere has this been made in the literatures. Nevertheless, our fundamentally functional classification captures, but then again transcends the more traditional, structural perspective as the last of the ten groups indicate. In fact, it is our firm conviction that both the structural and functional outlooks should always be adopted in order to better appreciate the social structure of any given Igbo community.

#### ***(d) Igbo Masquerades as Instruments of Social Engineering***

The social force that Igbo masquerades command lies in the fact that the past, the present and the future of the people are at once brought into a single picture by impersonating spirits of the ancestors. Through the peoples' own creativity in masquerading, the masses are organized and mobilized during festivals or carnivals. Adiele Afigbo (1981) recognizes, in Igbo societies, the vital role of masquerades "in promoting relaxation and conviviality" (p. 20). Aniakor (2002, p. 319) admits that the splendour of a typical Igbo festival is often attributable to the masquerades which apply all manner of schemes to attract and hold the attention of the people. The blend of the humanistic, musical, and artistic and Gnostic dynamics around the masquerade explains why its presence occasions the most vivacious public outing among the Igbo. Igbo masquerades x-ray Igbo understanding of Being (Reality) as a continuous process of self-unveiling amidst socially relevant actions in diverse situations. In this sense, *Mmadu* (human being) is "a being/creature whose existence reveals his essence [...] a microcosm (an embodiment) of the totality of being – his being; in *Mmadu*, one finds his essence and existence coinciding and being projected outwardly in a miniature way" (Dimonye, 2020, p. 37). The inter-relation between human being and spirit being is critical to a full appreciation of Igbo ontology. Hence, Aniakor declares that:

"Masks are central to the understanding of being and the process of being in the Igbo world [...]. Thus, while a dualistic view helps to define and identify the broad outlines of Igbo thought, it is in fact their inter-relation which provides the social equilibrium for human action." (Aniakor, 2002, p. 320)

Therefore, the Igbo deploy the instrumentality of masquerades not only to demonstrate Igbo ontology but also to achieve the objectives of social engineering and cohesion.

### ***(e) Igbo Masquerades as Instruments of Social Differentiation and Integration***

The concept of being an initiate of the masquerade society is inseparable from the Igbo idea and practice of masquerading. This notion of being an initiate is not only status-bestowing but also a social differentiation/integration tool. Igbo masquerades are thought to be embodiments not only of the ancestors, the village deities, and the entire spiritual forces of the community but also of the initiates into the masquerade society. Nonetheless, from the concept of initiation into the masquerade society (*Iba mmanwu*), one gets a new light of understanding about Igbo masquerade and masquerading. The expression ‘an initiate of the masquerade society’ (*onye bara mmanwu*) is here contrasted with the phrase ‘a non-initiate of the masquerade society’ (*ogbodu / onye amaghi mmanwu*). Being an initiate of the masquerade society connotes something more than the mere rites of initiation. It invokes the ideas of heroism and meritocracy; it implies coming of age not only spiritually but also materially.

Initiation into the masquerade society is more of a knowledge (cultural) thing rather than a ritual (religious) affair. Knowledge, here, indicates the culture which is “*the spiritual form of society* which is the totality of the distinguishing characteristics of a given society” (Mondin, 2011, p. 150). Hence, an initiate into the masquerade society is obliged to *be acquainted with* all those things that characterize and distinguish the world of masquerade society which a non-initiate cannot boast of knowing within a specific Igbo cultural context.

The uninitiated (*Ogbodu*) dares not parade himself before the masquerade; he quickly hides his face and disappears from the presence of the masquerade or from the company of the initiated as soon as the masquerade surfaces. This is a humiliating experience indicating that the person has not yet fully evolved culturally and otherwise. As a result, the uninitiated (*Ogbodu*) in question works on him-self striving to satisfy the broad and the necessary requirements for initiation until he is eventually properly initiated. Otherwise, he continues to live a life of self-exclusion in the community he belongs. Therefore, masquerade and masquerading in Igbo land symbolize the self-propelling and achievement-driven spirit of the people especially the youth. Moreover, they demonstrate that among the Igbo, Being, Doing, Knowing, Having coincide. This idea may be easily leveraged on as an instrument of social differentiation aimed at a harmonious re/integration of the Igbo society.

### **A Critical Evaluation of the Idea and Practice of Masquerading among the Igbo**

Art works are a derivative form of actions conceived and executed in the context of a given cultural milieu. (Mannheim, 2003, pp. 80–81). The Igbo understanding of art (*nka*) is contiguous with Igbo meaning of work which is an activity in variety of situations in life with structural relevance as well as utilitarian and aesthetic values for the people. (Amankulo, 2002, p. 412). Therefore, to abolish Igbo masquerading is tantamount to stifling the creative and innovative impulses of the Igbo nation. It will not only entrench consumerism among the people, but also retard progress and the blossoming of human wellbeing in the land. As an ensemble of Igbo (African) arts, in Igbo masquerades one can find different forms of art like drama, dance, acrobatics,

music, folklore, designs, paintings, carvings, sculptures, writings, architecture, motions, gestures *etc.*

Masquerade societies (cults) in Igbo land are sometimes identified as secret societies. (Amucheazi, 2002). Regarding this, Afigbo (1981, pp. 20–21) clarifies that the contact of the Igbo with the Benue-Congo peoples of the Cross-River plain and valley, via the people of Arochukwu, helped to accentuate and solidify the tag of ‘secret society’ among Igbo masquerades. However, Njoku debunks this claim and states emphatically that:

“While the mid-seventeenth-century rise of the Aro as uncrowned kings of Eastern Nigeria marked a new dawn in Igbo history, it is important to say that it was not by any means the genesis of masquerade cults, secret societies, age grades, and social clubs among the Igbo [...] The Igbo traditions predate the later cross cultural borrowing between the Igbo and their non-Igbo neighbors.” (Njoku, 2020, pp. 63–64).

The evidence of this later study indicates that, even though Igbo masquerade cult is exclusively for the ‘initiated’ men, there is no likelihood for a clash of interest among the masquerades, titled associations (*Ndi Nze na Ozo*), the secret societies, the women’s groups (*Umuada / Umuokpu*) and the age grades. In fact, according to Njoku (2020), the Igbo pre-colonial civil association networks – masquerades, secret societies, age-grade associations, and social clubs – were intricately harmonized and coordinated by complex strands of checks and balances that would ensure minimal frictions as the “members were schooled to uphold the myths and legends constructed and offered as the authentic history of the people” (Njoku, 2020, p. 65).

Problems tend to arise when one confuses the masquerade (as an) institution and the masquerade (as a) cult relative to other Igbo socio-cultural agencies. A possible solution to this sort of problem is to emphasize the socio-anthropological dimension of the masquerade society over and above its cultural dimension. The former focuses on the socialization and recreational needs of the people; the later pays more attention to the religious (ideological) and epistemological aspects of societal development. In fact, there should be a separation of the two dimensions of the masquerade society. The latter which is more congenial to secret societies should be consigned to the specific domain of traditional Igbo mysticism (talking of the diviners, soothsayers, rain-makers, traditional medicine men and women, visionaries, and spiritualists) for the purpose of unravelling and addressing deeper cosmological and mystical questions of the Igbo nation. The masquerade society should be content only with the former. This is to reduce its sphere of influence and the chances of its conflict with other divisions of Igbo society.

Nevertheless, it is more rational to toe the path of dialogue, inclusion, consensus and compromise among all these different specialties, societies and agencies of Igbo culture professionals than to compartmentalize knowledge and social actions. Hence, cooperation towards evolving system of systems in this regard is critical. Louisa Amaechi (2018) remarks that the traditional Igbo society is well abreast of the impartiality and the excellence of the collaboration between Igbo masquerade society and the *Umu-Ada* (Igbo Daughters) fraternity in ensuring social justice, peace and conflict resolution across the length and breadth of Igbo land. She anticipates a greater collaboration between these two systems as alternative dispute resolution mechanisms in Igbo land. More cooperation is, in fact, expected between the masquerade institution and other socio-cultural divisions of Igbo society.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to stress that only the Igbo themselves can effectively reconstruct the practice of masquerading in Igbo land creating the value and meaning around it as they deem fit in the light of modern changes of the day. Aliens do not have what it takes to attempt such a culturally deep-rooted task; it is simply too ‘high’ (or, rather, opaque) for them. In his description of the masquerade cult in Igbo land, G. T. Basden (2006) refers to it despicably erroneously as the business of “young men of leisure who happen to be suffering from an attack of ennui”, as “somewhat of a nuisance”, and as “more or less a Saturday and Sunday pastime” making the whole idea and practice of mask-spirit among the Igbo a child’s play (Basden, 2006, pp. 193–194). When the different categories of professionals in the domain of Igbo culture unite in the spirit of openness to truth and social justice, the reconstruction of Igbo culture and development of Igbo nation will be the result. Today, unfortunately, the noble Igbo cultural institution of masquerading has degenerated into an instrument of victimization, exploitation and enslavement. Some hideous people easily leverage on their close connection with the masquerade society as to dominate and have a malign influence on others. They and these others could be members of the same family, kindred or clan. The former disregard the latter’s autonomy and freedom. This way, individual freedom is hampered and, by extension, the overall development of the society prevented. We grant that this condition is not inherent in Igbo masquerade institution but rather external to it; but even so, we think that the reputation of Igbo masquerade institution has now been greatly compromised – a situation our ancestors never experienced.

Nowadays, appeals to the shrine (of a masquerade society) are rampant among Igbo people for selfish and instrumental reasons. This is possible given that in Igbo land, as Nwagwu (2012) says:

“The masquerade society is the agent of the community deities. It is a symbol of the shrine. The [masquerade] society runs errands for the deities through the directives of the priest of the deity... [Thus,] masquerade enforces absolute adherence to the community deities.” (Nwagwu, 2012, p. 242)

The abuse of the freedom of individual self-determination and freedom of religion and other fundamental human rights by the masquerade society and their mercenaries should be cautioned against and sanctioned by Igbo leaders of thought and civil organizations. Concerns for the ethics of Igbo masquerading cannot be thrown overboard without harvesting terrible aberrations and malpractices.

Nowadays, the mischievous and unbecoming attitudes of many Igbo masquerades are rife in different communities. Many well-meaning Igbo persons are worried about the alarming misconduct of most masquerades in the different parts of Igbo land. For example, it has been severally reported that “the rampaging activities of masquerades in most parts of Nsukka zone [have resulted in] deaths as well as destruction of people’s properties” (*The Starlite*, 2011). One of the dastardly acts of atrocity committed by masquerades in Nsukka area of Igbo nation is the case of a 60-year-old man, one Mr. Emma Nnamani, who was alleged to have been stabbed to death by an *Odo* masquerade on June 27, 2013. The ugly event took place in Umuofiagu Village in Ukehe Community, Igbo-Etiti Local Government Area of Enugu State (*The Truth News* 2013). As a result, the present generation of Igbo hardly regards the masquerades as the embodiments of the spirit of the ancestors (Oguamanam *et al.*, 2018).

Akam decried the worrisome level of corruption that has infiltrated into and pervaded the entire masquerade cult in Igbo land turning this once noble cultural heritage of the Igbo into “an institution that is only machinery for victimization, oppression, torture, embarrassment and what have you” (Akam, 1995, p. 114). He insists that the leaders in Igbo land should not fold their hands and watch the cultural institution of masquerade thwart the social development of Igbo nation by its unruly, barbaric and atrocious conducts. His position is that a true internal transformation of Igbo masquerade institution would obviate the need to abolish it. He strongly condemns the excesses of Igbo masquerades saying that:

“The masquerade that rapes, inflicts physical injuries and even kills, the masquerade that dispenses injustice and avenges the innocent; the masquerade that prevents the exercise of civic responsibility and denies one the exercise of his freedom and rights, is a nuisance [...] Such a masquerade portends misery and ruins all that is left of the joys of social living.” (Akam, 1995, p. 115)

Fagothey says that right reason “is the norm of morality [...] [and] reason has to be its own critic”. It scrutinizes and judges the morality of human act on three grounds: the act itself, the motive and the circumstances. According to him, “to be morally good a human act must agree with the norm of morality on all three counts: in its nature, its motive, and its circumstances. Disconformity in any one of them, makes the act morally wrong” (Fagothey, 1963, pp. 93, 106). Therefore, to promote social order, Igbo masquerade institution must follow ethical principle of right reason which disposes it to perform only those acts for which it can be more or less responsible. The masquerades, themselves, must also endeavour to avoid those factors that might destroy or weaken their responsibility during displays such as alcoholism, drug abuse, ignorance, force, passion, and fear.

Meanwhile, there are many positive and noble goals to which the practice of Igbo masquerading could be channelled as a public institution. For example, the following twelve specific human interests could be captured, directly or indirectly, through Igbo masquerading: (i) Entertainment, (ii) Tourist attraction, (iii) Social (self-)criticism, (iv) Socio-political mobilization, (v) Cultural research, (vi) Sports and exercise, (vii) Socialization and value education, (viii) Economic development through local and foreign exchanges in arts and crafts, (ix) Intelligence gathering and security needs, (x) High psychosocial self-esteem following cultural self-determination, (xi) Appreciation of religious and ideological foundations and learning process of the Igbo nation through trans-cultural and intercultural metaphors, and (xii) Promotion of peace and harmonious existence among the people.

It, now, becomes critical to reconstruct Igbo masquerading given that the conceptualizations of the Igbo art of masquerading have changed overtime. This change, no doubt, manifests itself in the many aberrations we witness today in the Igbo practice of masquerading. Although the masquerade society had been considered originally as a secret society, the idea of secret society among the Igbo today has radically shifted from any link with masquerades. Francis O. C. Njoku (2009) rightly observes that contemporary understanding of secret society among the Igbo is that of:

“A closed group associated with private or unorthodox/devilish rites sometimes ritualized in human blood, within which members are bound up by an oath of secrecy. Members are alleged to indulge in human sacrifices for the prosperity and protection of its members.” (Njoku, 2009, p. 49)

Francis O. C. Njoku (2009) admonishes, in this connection, that we must do away with superstitions and magical attitudes in the name of culture (or religion). According to him, the Igbo monotheistic religious belief should rather lead them to fascination and friendship with God. For, as Njoku explains:

“Being fascinated is to be drawn by the intrinsic or positive value in the Holy, which disposes one for friendship with Him. But in superstition, the Holy is kept at arm’s length; in magic, the source of power is manipulated.” (Njoku, 2009, p. 54)

The point being advanced here is that stressing the secretive and exclusive character of many Igbo traditional practices (including the art of masquerading) will ever rub the Igbo of the opportunity to pursue and realize their social hope, “in an atmosphere of mutual trust and understanding” (Njoku, 2009, p. 57). Moreover, the idea of masquerades as the symbolic representation of the ancestors is highly compromised by the present generation of Igbo youths judging from their attitudes to the masquerades and the comportments of the masquerades themselves during displays. This situation is, in turn, fuelled by the growing secularism (or rather: religious syncretism) in Igbo society today. But, is there a way of reversing this ugly trend?

### **The Critical Way Forward**

The masquerade cults are characterized not as ‘secret societies’, but rather as “privileged and restricted organizations.” (Afigbo, 1981, p. 148). However, given that there is an element of mutual exclusion between the initiated and the uninitiated, the cult is bound to entrench suspicion and disunity among the people. More importantly, there is the urgent need to navigate the Igbo masquerade institution away from the above socio-cultural pathologies that seem to have gripped it so firmly. How does one go about reconstructing the Igbo art of masquerading with truth and social justice, the key normative ideals of the Igbo, as critical imperatives? The answer lies in instilling some cultural changes in the practice.

Igbo culture is inherently religious. But, it is possible to uncouple religion (whether African Traditional Religion or indeed any other institutionalized religion) from Igbo masquerading without compromising the religious character of Igbo culture by the process of what Mannheim (2003) calls “democratization of culture”. For him, this entails a culture change by making the strata actively participating in cultural life (in this case: Igbo masquerading) whether as creators or as recipients to become broader and more inclusive (Mannheim, 2003, p. 175). The process abhors the privileging of certain religious elites over the general mass of the society when it comes to cultural matters. It promotes greater communicability in cultural sphere as a manifest outgrowth of the democratic ontological principle of human equality. In all fields of culture, the autonomy of the individuals is transformed into the autonomy of the social units geared towards the cultural reproduction of society. Applying these principles of democratization of culture to the practice of Igbo masquerading might permit certain fundamental changes relating to (a) the place of the village deity, the chief priest and the rituals of cleansing and exhortation in contemporary Igbo masquerading, (b) the use of traditional calendar for masquerading, (c) the ownership and custody of masquerade costumes, (d) the venue, time and procedure of initiation into the masquerade cult, (e) the admissibility or otherwise of women into the masquerade society, and (f)

the spaces within which masquerades are only allowed to parade themselves. All these changes ought not to affect the meaning and conceptualization of Igbo masquerading as a symbolic manifestation of the ancestors.

The Karl Mannheim's democratization of culture is roughly equivalent to the Igbo philosophy of *Igwebuike*. *Igwebuike* philosophy is the "principle of harmony, community, solidarity, and complementary [...] the underlying principle of African Philosophy" (Kanu, 2021, p. 31). Many communities in Anambra State, for example, have achieved great success in sanitizing their masquerade system using the principle of *Igwebuike*. This is practiced, for instance, by the issuance of identity cards (with a certain number inscribed on them) to all masquerades under a given cult head in any given village/town; and, by way of proper accountability on the day's affairs, these masquerades are expected to return same to the cult head at the end of each outing. More restricting rules/measures, like this one, could be launched to curtail the excesses of the masquerades and redeem the beliefs and attitude of the people toward the masquerades in the spirit of *Igwebuike* philosophy.

We, therefore, strongly recommend that the indigenous Igbo creative and dramatic arts in which the characters are partially or fully masked be revived and revitalized. There are many examples of such Igbo dramatic arts displays in the history of the Igbo people such as the *Odo* festival drama in Ukehe of Nsukka cultural zone of Enugu State, the *Uzoiyi* festival plays in Umuoji of Idemmili area of Anambra State, *Okonko* plays in Orlu areas of Imo State, the *Ikoro* plays in Ngwaland of Abia State, and the *Okumkpo* plays in Afikpo of Ebonyi State. These plays are staged usually in the market squares or the ancestral (village) squares, with at least an episode, two or more characters carefully disguised by masks and make-ups and definite moral lessons made clear by the end of the episode. In fact, such dramatic art performances are often deemed to be dramatic art collaboration between the dead and the living. Since theatre and (Igbo) masquerading have common root in ancestral worship (Nwabueze, 1987), one may say that every Igbo masquerade is an actor/dramatist. Amankulo corroborates this view when he emphasizes that:

"The immunity the mask imposes on the actor transforms him into a spirit, the one who can know all and do all without being questioned by anybody. This is why, in parts of Igbo land, the masked actor is automatically a *Mmanwu* (a spirit) and he is conventionally accorded much respect." (Amankulo, 2002, pp. 405–406)

For one thing, when the masquerade dramatic arts displays are revived and reformed across the Igbo nation, it would become a modern and veritable source of tourist attraction with juicy economic potential. It would help to project the good image of the Igbo to the outside world. It would also serve as a cogent means of achieving social cohesion and harmony among the people. Of course, it counts as a happy way of preserving the Igbo culture and civilizing both present and future generations of Igbo people since these arts find expression in the five south-eastern states of Nigeria where the local language of the overwhelming majority is Igbo. Hence, Igbo cultural leaders and stake holders should urgently consider reforming and resuscitating this dramatic element of Igbo masquerading.

The Igbo dramatic arts were employed to satirize the *status quo* of colonialism and missionary activities using masked characters thereby undermining their stranglehold on Igbo psyche. It is regrettable, however, that the Igbo mimetic arts had to suffocate and die due to the European dismantling of the Igbo traditional religious cum political leadership that sustained the culture of

dramatic arts. Under the colonial regime, the huge human artistic inputs and economic support needed to keep the culture of dramatic arts alive fizzled out due to apparent lack of attention. Nevertheless, the overall masquerade cult and performances did not go under waters with the coming of the Europeans; they survive till date. Only the dramatic aspect of the masquerade art is what seems to have suffered a shipwreck (Amankulo, 2002).

Following this observation, we strongly recommend also that more and more budgetary allocations and funds be made available in Igbo land for the resuscitation, reformation and promotion of the dying elements of Igbo cultural practices particularly that of Igbo masquerade dramatic arts, but also the associated practices such as Igbo cosmology and mysticism. Let us quickly add that there is equally the urgent need for more research on these fading Igbo cultural practices, particularly on the demography, taxonomy as well as the hierarchy of the different categories of Igbo masquerades.

In short, there should be a synergy among all the critical stake holders in Igbo culture including scholars of Igbo cultural studies with the aim of not only collaborating in their respective culture constituencies but also evolving an acceptable code of conduct/ethics for the different Igbo cultural practices including masquerading. Such a grand assembly of Igbo cultural practitioners and scholars should also be able to address the problems of cultural dynamism, mutation and transformation using the method of democratization of culture / *Igwebuiké* philosophy. In particular, they should be able to resolve the possible and actual conflicts between the Igbo practice of masquerading and some elements of modernity like the law courts, modernization and globalization.

It becomes imperative, in the face of the contemporary abuses within Igbo practice of masquerading, to advance the concept of ‘Igbo masquerade school’: a forum where intending masquerade performers are groomed on the idea and the ethos of masquerading within the context of the community’s value system. Such a school should be supervised by the critical stake holders including the local government authorities. This is crucial since it does appear that the present generation of Igbo masqueraders is grossly ignorant of the cultural demands of masquerading. Ngangah (2021) wants potential Igbo masqueraders to realize that:

“The masquerade performer is an agent as well as a participant-observer of the communal ethos his act and art symbolize. Experimentally, he is a custodian of the culture but also the provoker of communally acceptable change of aspects of that same culture within the context of the experimental theory of knowledge.” (Ngangah, 2021, pp. 24–25).

If the masqueraders are made to realize this fact and the responsibility that goes with it, they are likely to comport themselves better.

## Conclusion

It seems that the ultimate reason why the Igbo art of masquerading is fraught with many abuses and distortions is because of the erosion of the consciousness of Igbo culture on the part of the civilized members of the Igbo communities. Instead of criticizing whatever abuses therein, many of these elites are rather calling for the abolition of masquerading. Others show deep apathy to it. As a result, the Igbo practice of masquerading now suffers serious reputation deficit. But, this situation needs to be changed via sustained

critical reconstructions on the part of the enlightened members of the society (most especially, the scholars of Igbo culture) leveraging on such theoretical frameworks like rational reconstruction (Jürgen Habermas), democratization of culture (Karl Mannheim) and *Igwebuike* philosophy (Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu).

In keeping with this goal, a redefinition of the Igbo art of masquerading has been offered as something more than merely wearing of masks; it is, in a sense, an expression of the philosophy of life of the Igbo. Masquerading truly reminds us that we all wear masks in two modes – our bodies and our behaviours. Following this understanding, the beliefs and attitudes of the Igbo people towards the masquerades and the art of parading them ought to change. The facelessness of the masquerade is not at all an excuse to misbehave. Wearing an extra mask merely helps one to realize the spirit within in a socially accepted and acceptable manner; it is not an invitation to anarchy. The reasons some people are calling for the abolition of masquerading have been evaluated and found not to be cogent. One does not throw away the baby with the bath water. We rather argue that the Igbo art of masquerading has great potential for social, economic and environmental development of the Igbo nation submitting that the practice should not be abolished but instead needs to be reconstructed and reformed.

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**Simeon C. Dimonye, Martin F. Asiegbu**

### **Rekonstrukcija ideje i prakse maskiranja među narodima Igboja u jugoistočnoj Nigeriji**

#### **Sažetak**

*Studija ispituje fenomen maskiranja u kulturi Igbo naroda. Filozofski istražuje kozmologiju i kulturnu antropologiju maskiranja Igboja, izvlačeći neke važne implikacije za koje autori vjeruju da imaju utjecaj na istinu o ljudskom postojanju. Istražuje distorzije unutar i oko ove kulturne prakse Igboja u odnosu na njen imanentni značaj i stoga je pokušava rekonstruirati. Rad pokazuje da golemi potencijali za razvoj svojstveni maskiranju Igboja nadmašuju njegove manjkavosti. Igboansko maskiranje danas često dijeli sadašnju generaciju od starije generacije igboja. Potonji se žale na to da današnji način maskiranja više ne odražava ključne kulturne ideale naroda. Ali, ova situacija nije dobila zasluženu pažnju među znanstvenicima. Značaj ove studije, dakle, leži upravo u pokušaju teorijske i normativne rekonstrukcije maskiranja među Igboima. Cilj je rada kritički se baviti Igbo maskiranjem s ciljem spašavanja od povezanih negativnosti. U svjetlu ključnih ideala istine i socijalne pravde kod Igboja, rad nudi put naprijed i daje neke preporuke. Kao filozofsko istraživanje, studija koristi metode analize, preskripcije i spekulacije.*

#### **Ključne riječi**

egzistencijska važnost, ideja, Igbo, maskiranje, praksa, jugoistočna Nigerija, rekonstrukcija

**Simeon C. Dimonye, Martin F. Asiegbu**

## **Eine Rekonstruktion der Idee und Praxen der Maskierung unter den Igbo-Völkern in Südostnigeria**

### **Zusammenfassung**

*Diese Studie setzt sich mit dem Phänomen der Maskierung in der Kultur der Igbo auseinander. Es handelt sich um eine philosophische Untersuchung der Kosmologie und Kulturanthropologie der Maskierung der Igbo, wobei einige wichtige Implikationen gezogen werden, die, wie die Autoren glauben, einen Einfluss auf die Wahrheit über die menschliche Existenz haben könne. Sie befasst sich mit den Distorsionen innerhalb dieser kulturellen Praxis der Igbo und um sie herum im Bezug auf ihre immanente Bedeutsamkeit und versucht sie daher zu rekonstituieren. Die Arbeit zeigt, dass die große Entwicklungspotentiale, die dem Maskieren der Igbo eigen sind, seine Mangeln überwiegen. Heutzutage trennt das Maskieren oft die jetzige Generation von der älteren Generation der Igbo. Die Letzteren beklagen sich darüber, dass das Maskieren in seiner heutigen Art und Weise nicht mehr die kulturellen Kernideale des Volkes widerspiegelt. Jedoch hat diese Situation von den Wissenschaftlern nicht die verdiente Aufmerksamkeit bekommen. Die Bedeutung dieser Studie liegt, also, gerade im Versuch einer theoretischen und normativen Rekonstruktion der Maskierung unter den Igbo. Das Ziel der Arbeit ist eine kritische Befassung mit der Maskierung der Igbo, um sie vor den mit ihr verbundenen Negativitäten zu retten. Im Lichte der Kernideale der Wahrheit und der sozialen Gerechtigkeit bei den Igbo, bietet diese Arbeit den Weg nach vorne an und macht einige Empfehlungen. Als eine philosophische Untersuchung, benutzt diese Studie Methoden der Analyse, Präskription und Spekulation.*

### **Schlüsselwörter**

existenzielle Bedeutung, Idee, Igbo, Maskierung, Praxis, Südostnigeria, Rekonstruktion

**Simeon C. Dimonye, Martin F. Asiegbu**

## **La reconstruction de l'idée et de la pratique de la mascarade chez le peuple Igbo au sud-est du Nigéria**

### **Résumé**

*Cette étude interroge le phénomène de mascarade dans la culture Igbo. Elle analyse d'un point de vue philosophique la cosmologie et l'anthropologie culturelle en tirant d'importantes conclusions, qui, selon les auteurs, ont une incidence sur la vérité de l'existence humaine. L'étude recherche les déformations au sein et autour de cette pratique culturelle Igbo par rapport au contexte immanent à sa signification, et ainsi, tente de la reconstruire. L'article montre que l'énorme potentiel de développement inhérent aux mascarades Igbo l'emporte sur ses inconvénients. Aujourd'hui la mascarade Igbo tend à séparer la présente génération de l'ancienne génération Igbo. Les anciens se plaignent de la manière de se masquer qui ne reflète plus aujourd'hui les idéaux culturels clés du peuple. Pourtant, cette situation n'a pas reçu l'attention qu'elle mérite parmi les scientifiques. L'importance de cette étude réside, ainsi, justement dans la tentative théorique et reconstruction normative des mascarades chez les Igbo. L'objectif de ce travail est de développer un discours critique sur les mascarades Igbo afin de les libérer des négativités qui leurs sont associées. À la lumière des idéaux clés de la vérité et de la justice sociale chez les Igbo, ce travail présente la voie à suivre et formule quelques recommandations. En tant que recherche philosophique, l'étude se sert de la méthode analytique, prescriptive et de spéculative.*

### **Mots-clés**

importance existentielle, idée, Igbo, mascarade, pratique, sud-est du Nigéria, reconstruction