NIGER DELTA RESEARCH DIGEST VOLUME 14 NO 2 ISSN: 2141-1468 March 30, 2025

EVALUATING THE DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THE OKI SOCIAL MASQUERADE OF OTUOBHI COMMUNITY

Baimane Ephraim Amange
Department of Theatre Arts
Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State.

==========

Abstract

This paper examines the unique features of the Oki social masquerade of Otuobhi community of Anyama clan in the Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. Though masquerades in African societies can have a spiritual, ritual and social role, social masquerades are non spiritual and are focused on entertainment, cultural education and unity. Literature available pays much attention to theatricality and aesthetics without sufficient literature covering the characteristic of social masquerades, especially Oki. The paper aims at assessing the distinctive features that distinguish the Oki masquerade against the ritualistic and other social masquerades in Nigeria with regards to its secular characteristics. The study used historical, sociological and emic approaches for data collection. The results show that, the Oki is a masquerade ceremony held on the 26th of December every year. The Oki masquerade dramatises how a predator fish endangering the river ecosystem, was trapped. It is characterised by the dramatisation of this story, secular costumes, music and dance, and openness of participation of men, women and children. The Oki masquerade does not require offerings, worship, or spiritual obligations, as opposed to ritualistic masquerades, and it focuses on the entertainment aspect, cultural promotion aspects, and functions of the masquerade to incorporate social unity. The research suggests that Oki masquerade should be marketed as a cultural tourist activity, the performance and equipment of the activity should be documented to be conserved and should be included in the educational and community activities to continue upholding Ogbia culture. Conclusively, Oki masquerade is an illustration of a social masquerade that breaks down the categorization of all masquerades as ritualistic, thus showing flexibility, inclusivity, and community importance in modern Ogbia community.

Introduction

The culture of a people is expressed in their way of life, their institutions, ideologies, artifacts, creative arts, dress code and more. These patterns of life evolved by the people are what distinguishes them from their neighbors. According to Zulu Sofola, these distinguishing cultural factors can be conceptualized as the “learned patterns of behavior, ideas, beliefs and artifacts, shared by a people and society, transmitted by them from one generation to the

other" (qtd. in Solomon Ejeke, 64). Consequently, these transmitted patterns of life form the worldview of a people, their belief system, mode of worship, and interactions with the supernatural. Within this broader cultural framework, the culture of masquerade performance is common to Africans, but its perception and functions vary from one society to another. Although masquerade culture may appear similar across communities, its functions and usefulness often differ, because a masquerade is not what it says it is (cannot define itself), it is what the devotees consider it to be that it is. Therefore, a culture can classify a masquerade as religious or secular depending on its perception and the functions it serves within the host society.

With the rise in modernity and the diminishing of ritualistic and religious adherence in many activities, the sacredness and ritual purity of many masquerade performances have gradually declined. This transformation has led to the emergence of social masquerades, which are defined by the loss of sacredness, ritual sanctity, and metaphysical essence (Samuel Ukala 164). Consequently, individuals pay more attention to entertainment and cultural expression particularly during social occasions like carnivals, marriages, burials, and holidays. This model is evident in social masquerades among the Ogbia people such as the Oki of Otuobhi, Akpembe of Ewoi, Odemimom of otuke and Oburumadu of Emeyal.

These masquerades are devoid of magic or ritualistic content. Their primary functions include entertainment, cultural promotion, propagation, preservation, and traditional artistic education (Baimane Ephraim Amange 4, 7). In light of these distincting characteristics feature of different masquerade, this study's focus/scope is to evaluate and articulate the distinctive features of the Oki social masquerade of Otuobhi community of Anyama clan in Ogbia Local Government area of Bayelsa State, with particular focus on its performance structure, social features, and overall distinctive characteristics that set it apart from ritualistic masquerades and other social masquerades.

Statement of the Problem

It is common knowledge that social masquerades are significant cultural manifestations in African cultures. Their primary functions are entertainment, educational and social. They have been examined by scholars in a variety of settings. Nevertheless, the vast majority of studies focus on theatricality, aesthetics, or dynamics of performance more than the particularities that characterize them. To take the example, Alex Asigbo reviewed carnival

masquerades, their colorful costumes, and the avoidance of ritualistic objects, but he did not consider the distinctive features which make them socially exclusive (7). Ukala described numerous African social masquerades, among them the Buluba of the Makonde, Wara of the Bambara, Kwagh Hir of the Tiv, Owu and Ikaki of the Kalabari and Gelede of the Yoruba. He wrote about theatrical and performative elements only without delving into the peculiarities of the latter (162-164). Margaret Olugbemisola Areo and Abdulmalik Anatole Amali also mentioned some entertainment and aesthetic purposes of social masquerades in Ile-Ife and among the Idoma, however, they did not explore the characteristics or features that differentiate the social and ritualistic masquerades (67; 289).

Nevertheless, the central problem that gives rise to this study is the unanswered question of what the distinctive features of the Oki social masquerade are, especially when compared with other masquerades in the region and in Nigeria as a whole. The reason for this is that, existing scholarly works do not address the defining characteristics of the Oki masquerade, nor the distinctive elements that set the Oki masquerade apart from both ritualistic and other social masquerades. It is such scholarly ambiguity that has led to misunderstandings that classify all masquerades as either rituals or fetishes. However, in spite of the fact that several social masquerades are made to entertain, educate and bond the community, there are still these misconceptions. They restrict cultural knowledge and weaken proper records of tradition of the Ogbia masquerades. Therefore, this study seeks to evaluate and clearly articulate the distinctive features of the Oki social masquerade for better analysis and discussions in the feature.

Methodology

The study adopted the historical, sociological and emic models for data collection. The historical method was used to trace the origin and development of the Otuobhi people and their Oki masquerade culture. This involved examining historical documents, artifacts, and oral interviews regarding the community where the Oki masquerade is domiciled. The sociological method involved direct interaction with members of the communities under study. The Oki masquerade custodians were interviewed to get an idea on the origin, development, and social meaning of the Oki masquerade in the Otuobhi community. The emic method involved participant observation and filming when Oki performances were being performed in Otuobhi and other events. This inside view could give direct information about the analysis of the performance, structure, and communal meaning of the masquerade. Moreover, books, journals, magazines, and online

reports provided the appropriate scholarly assertions on masquerade studies. These were compared and supported to develop a contextual background to the research.

Literature Review

Masquerade Traditions in Nigeria

The masquerades are deeply cultural in Nigeria and the convergence of spiritual, social, and artistic elements in the form of masquerades. Masquerades have varied meanings across ethnic groups: they are believed to be the spirits of the dead or patrons of people, spirits of the forest and spirits of the water. When de-ritualized, they are perceived as masked performers or dancers in the streets. Ukala researched the masquerades of the Africans and proposed that, they are masked dancers who had come to pay homage to the living during festivals and they represented their ancestors and supernatural beings. Such performances are complimented by the use of fancy costumes, music, and dancing, which hides the identity of the wearer, yet carries a cultural and spiritual significance (162). Masquerades serve two purposes: religious masquerades are meant to worship, propitiate, and deify, usually placed in groves or shrines. Secular masquerades are aimed at entertainment, manifesting itself in carnivals and other related social situations. It is celebrated that religious masquerades can adopt religious forces and help to communicate with ancestors and deities. It is evident that this duality brings to fore the fact that masquerades perform the functions of cultural and spiritual mediators within Nigerian society.

Models of Masquerade Traditions across Ethnic Groups in Nigeria

Yoruba (Egungun)

Among the Yoruba, masquerades are regarded as the spirits of departed forebears who appear to fulfill spiritual assignments (Ogundeji qtd in Asigbo 5). In this context, the view on masquerade is that of sacred and spiritual function, and not secular. For example, as Oyin Ogunba explains that, the Egungun masquerade is believed to visit the living annually, neutralizing past evils and bringing peace and blessings (16). Another sacred function is attached to the view of masquerade in this context too, because only a masquerade with supposed spiritual powers can neutralize evil and bring blessing to a people. Further, Gilbert Fai emphasizes that Egungun demonstrates the continued guidance of ancestors (44). This also connotes the spiritual functions attached to the Egungun masquerade. Akintoyo notes that Yoruba folklore regards masquerades as heavenly beings that

sometimes instill fear, describing Egungun as a "skeleton made alive" (5). It is said that YOruba masquerades connect the real world with the spiritual world, pay tribute to ancestors, and bring unity to the community. In this sense, a majority of Yoruba masquerades such as Egungun are not only the spiritual tools, but also the living sources of the group memory and moral instructions.

Igbo (Mmanwu, Odo)

In the same way, Igbo masquerades such as the Mmanwu and Odo can be considered super human and they end up holding a communion with the living as they are seen to be the incarnation of the spirit of ancestors (Odoja Asogwa, 40). They are observed in festivals, funerals, and farming cycles, which facilitate the wellbeing of the community and social bond (Ossie Onuora Enekwe 56). This statement highlights the holiness and spirituality of these masquerades. Charles Oguamanam, et al., state that the Odo masquerade is a Godly messenger and it brings guidance, protection and blessings. Moreover, Odo masquerades serve social purposes, such as behavior control, marking the passage through the life, and fertility and prosperity (92-93). This shows how Igbo masquerades are dynamic tools which are able to combine spiritual reverence and social control in the way in which faith and community life interact in the implementation of such masquerades.

Ibibio and Annang (Ekpo)

The masquerades in the Ibibio and Annang communities are viewed as the manifestations of the late spirits. Thus, masquerades will not only have spiritual background in such cultures but also intermediaries and bridges between the living and the dead, guardians of community values and morals. Dominic Umoh asserts that "masquerades are spirits and not humans," (102). This assertion attached so much sacredness to masquerades in the culture of the Ibibio and Annang people. This view is also corroborated by Ebong Ukut who explains that, the Ekpo masquerade represents someone who has passed into the underworld (39), revealing that, masquerades are considered as ancestral spirits in this culture. Looking at some of the functions of the Ekpo masquerades, it is explained that the Ekpo masquerades maintain social order, discipline, and morality while spiritually connecting the living and the dead (Edikan Ekanem, 1; Etop Akwang, 44). Therefore, in these cultures, masquerades do not only serve spiritual purposes, but also act as mediators and connectors of the living with the dead, custodians of communal norms and ethical behavior.

Tiv (Kwaghir, Nyamtswam)

The communities in central Nigeria, Tiv, view Kwaghir and Nyamtswam as religious masquerades. Kwaghir is thought to be a representation of forefathers and fathers and the connection between the living and the dead. Dancers also wear costly dresses to present stories with moral and ethical teachings (Jonathan Mbachanga and Shadrach Ukuma 9-10). Therefore, masquerades of Tiv are intentional blending of performance, pedagogy and spiritual mediation.

Idoma, Izon, Kalabari, Nembe

Among the Idoma, Amali explains that, masquerades function as communal avatars, linking the living with ancestors and deities (184). This view is similar to the existing assertions about the Ekpo masquerades, indicating that, the functions of masquerade across cultures in Nigeria are sometime intertwined. In Izon culture, masquerades are regarded as water spirits and ancestral manifestations. The Izon Oki masquerade for instance, represents a sea spirit appearing during festivals (Augustin Emiemokumor 3). Masquerades in this context, are related to the riverine environment that characterizes the Izon people. Corroborating this, Sunday Abraye & Tams Azobor notes that Izon masks often resemble sea creatures, reflecting mammywater beliefs (89). This reveals the sacred believes associated with most masquerades across Nigeria. In Nembe, Ogbari Ama-Ogbari explain that masquerades symbolize departed ancestors and appear during festivals, coronations, and burial ceremonies (382). This connotes that, anytime these masquerades are being performed, the departed ancestors are also present in that performance.

All these examples demonstrate the geographical and cultural diversity of the masquerade in Nigeria, but also emphasize the common purpose of their use as an intermediary between the spiritual and temporal world. In general, the Nigerian masquerades fulfill both religious and secular roles.

Types of Masquerades

Ukala notes that the masquerades can be divided into ritual and social ones as each of them serves different purposes in Nigerian communities.

i. Ritualistic/Ritual Masquerades

According to Ukala, ritualistic masquerades have sacred functions, including the need to placate spirits, defile the territory, or to commemorate the death of

chiefs and kings. Their performances are usually in small spaces such as shrines and groves and have few audiences especially during the night (162164). Okeke states that night masquerades are used in the removal of witches and spiritual order, and therefore strengthen their spiritual power in the community (118). This implies that the ritualistic/ ritual forms of masquerade serve sacred or religious purposes whenever being practiced.

ii. Social/Entertainment Masquerades

However, Ukala notes that social masquerades are staged in the society as entertainment and educators. They lack any ritualistic characteristics, are only kept in order to be reused, and are available to the entire participants such as women, children, and non initiates (163). Similar differences are pointed out by Areo in Ile-Ife whereby social masquerade performances are open and inclusive (67). Asigbo validates the fact that social masquerades in Izon together with other societies have secular roles whose core role is concerned with cultural expression and entertainment (133).

iii. Day vs. Night Masquerades

This type of masquerades is distinguished in its own way. Tochukwu Okeke notes that day masquerades are done in open-air entertainment, but night masquerades are relatively ritualistic and serve the limited audiences (118). This category corresponds to the religious and social opposition of masquerade. But there can be ritualised masquerades which occur during the day depending on their functions which incorporate both sacred and entertainment functions and illustrate the interchangeability of ritual and social types and ends of masquerades.

iv. Ritual Displacement and Transmutation from Sacred to Secular

According to Enekwe, the banning of ritualistic masquerades, the effect of foreign religions and modernization brought about the replacement of the rituals where sacred masquerades became the secular entertainment performances (22). This category includes the masquerades which were previously sacred and are now being celebrated as circular masquerades. Asigbo further notes that this change is also indicative of a larger cultural adjustment as masquerades change to ensure that they are socially relevant but the sacred powers they once possessed are no longer applicable (6).

Evolution of Social Masquerade

The development of social masquerades in Nigeria gives an example of how overtime historical, religious and cultural developments have altered traditional practices. These changes reflect the persistence of the masquerade traditions that changed according to the new social and religious realities without losing the aspects of their cultural background. According to Asogwa, colonialism, alien religions, and urbanization made major contributions towards stripping the spiritual nature of masquerades because converts tended to drop the ritual practices and view masquerades either as fetishism or devilish (41). Similarly, Nathan Agoro also adds that the dissemination of Christianity and Islam discouraged the rituals and diluted worshiping the ancestral deities and altered the societal views on masquerades (18). Thus, these forces started a slow change in the divine to the profane orientations and re-established the role of masquerades in society. Enekwe calls this selective ritualistic abandonment and preservation of entertainment characteristics as ritual displacement. This happens when masquerades lose their spiritual validity and cultural ancestral value and gradually develop into social masquerades (Mazi Ogbonna; Ademola Dasylva). This process mirrors a wider tendency, whereby religious activities become converted into cultural activities of a secular nature by enabling the communities to hold onto symbolism and aesthetic meaning despite the decline of the spiritual role. Masquerades, in this case, are both traditional and innovative, as they combine tradition and modernity.

There are distinct illustrations highlighting this change. According to Agoro, Igbo community in Yenogoa, Bayelsa state, suffered a complete death of ritualized masquerades following 1916 alongside a decisive transition between sacred and secular traditions of performances (18). However, in Ogbia, Chief Akogboin finds that spiritual masquerades had become ineffective with the transformation in the communal worship, and so the secular masquerades like the Egugum masquerade came into existence. On the same note, Horton points out that the strength of gods in the Kalabari cosmology hinges on the interest of worshippers as to why holy masquerades are transformed to social ones (101102). These are a few instances that show how the local context intercedes the adaptation of the masquerade practices, finding a balance between the admiration of the tradition and the social realities of the time.

Enekwe notes that the ritualistic masquerades, which were left behind, were transformed into entertainment in community events, festivals and carnivals with focus on cultural expression and showcasing of art (22). Asigbo also affirms

that this adaptation enabled the relevance of masquerades in the contemporary situations where they unite performance, education and recreation, although they did not lose symbolism (6). Thus, social masquerades nowadays also represent the ability of the cultural traditions to transform and both provide entertainment and connection to the ancestral past. The development of social masquerades, in my opinion, is one of the evidence of the perennial creativity of the Nigerian communities in maintaining the cultural identity. Spiritual authority and efficacy might be eroded, but the flexibility of masquerades guarantees their further applicability as artistic and social integration agents, as well as cultural memory agents.

Features of Social Masquerade Performance

Nigeria has evolved characteristic attributes of its social masquerades that have sharply contrasted them with their ritualistic counterparts with their focus on entertainment, expression of culture as well as the wide dissemination of their activities to the community. These qualities help to learn how masquerades have been modified to suit contemporary social conditions and retain a certain link to the traditional aesthetics and performance traditions. The following are some of these aspects of the social masquerade:

Secular Mask Figure

According to Chidiebere Ekweariri, social masquerade masks are not regarded as gods or spirits, but as tools of disguising the identity, characterizing the identity, and dramatizing (83). Amange goes ahead to point out that the masks are commonly burned down after performances to avoid the causes of spiritual attachment and this further supports the secularity of the mask (4). This conscious change highlights this transition between religious signage and artistic and dramatic functionality.

Secular Appearance and Performance Arena

According to Ukala, social masquerades are practiced in the open in the secular and the public, without any limitations, to the rest of the community (163). This is unlike ritualistic masquerades which are only limited to shrines and sacred areas and in most cases only to initiates or few audiences (162). The transparent character of performance highlights the democratization of the masquerade culture, which is made available and inclusive.

Secular Costume

Social masquerades have their costume which is decorative, colorful, and not contrived with any ritualistic or protective insignia and the new costume is focused on aesthetics and entertainment (Abdulmalik Adakole Amali, 189). According to Fiyinfoluwa Victor, the aspects of the performances like; Ibobo, Eyes token, and Adimu, which are traditionally associated with the power of the spirit, are consciously avoided in these performances to eliminate all spiritual and sacred affiliations. James Ndukaku Amankulor also validates the absence of ritual paraphernalia supporting secularism of social masquerades (152). These changes allow seeing the deliberate distance between social and spiritual masquerades, and remain visual and performative.

De-ritualized Music and Dance

Music and dance are two aspects that cannot be talked about in a masquerade context. They are mainly geared towards entertainment, cultural advancement, rest and education in social masquerades. Being collaborative art forms, they increase the performance and involvement of the audience (Akpabot et al. qtd. in Amange 23). Social masquerades are not based on ritualistic performances but aesthetic enjoyment and educational demonstration. One might understand that social masquerades are codified in a systematic way as it is evident in all evidence that they are distinguished according to ritual forms. Their characteristics are; a secularized mask figure, purpose, and functional; a secularized costume; secularized music and dance; open audience participation, lack of spiritual power and accommodation of all sexes and participants during performances. Such characteristics do not exist in the ritualistic and religious masquerade performances.It is very clear from all indications that, social masquerades are systematically codified to distinguish them from ritualistic forms. Their attributes include secularized mask figure, secularized purpose and function, secularized costume, music, and dance, open audience participation, lack of spiritual potency and the accommodation of all sexes and participants during performances. These distinguishing features are not present in ritualistic and sacred masquerade performances.

Discussion

Oki Masquerade Performance Structure

Oki masquerade is a social masquerade of the Ogbia people specifically performed by the Otuobhi community of Anyama clan in Ogbia local government area of Bayelsa State. Oki masquerade, which is a pivotal masquerade performance in Otuobhi community is an adaptation of a masquerade type in Nembe-Bassambiri. Oki which is performed every 26th December was brought to Otuobhi community by Mr. Donald Otunu in 1988. According to Betty Otunu and Victor Amaranya core participants of Oki masquerade in its maiden stage, narrated that, Oki masquerade is a play masquerade used for entertainment and leisure during festive seasons.

According to Victor, the Oki masquerade performance tells a story of a wild fish called Oki that terrorizes the river not allowing other smaller fishes to exist comfortable in the ecosystem. Oki in its quest for dominance however, succeeds in killing every fish in the river. Consequently, a fisherman noticed the violent act of Oki and decided to skillfully hunt Oki. The hunting of Oki was to enable other smaller fishes live and develop in the river ecosystem. Accompanied with singing, drumming, dancing and dramatic enactment, Oki was finally hunted and killed through a throw net. The enactment thereafter ended with singing and celebration for the defeat of Oki. According to Opuene Louise and Victor Amaranye, Oki masquerade is not a ritualistic masquerade. They both explained that Oki is a borrowed masquerade dance from Nembe and that it has no link with the worship of a deity in Otuobhi community.

Social Features of the Oki Masquerade

Osain Ekinani, a prominent devotee of Oki masquerade dance revealed that the masquerade dance was a youth and children festival celebration done in Otuobhi during festival seasons. However, due to the interest and entertainment satisfaction Oki performance generated; its grandeur and dexterity in performance, it was officially adopted as a communal masquerade performance every 26th of December. From the researcher's investigation, it was reported that a Christian revivalist called Rev. Justice Aggo visited the community in the early 2002 and wanted the masquerade dance abolished but, the community elders refused with the argument that the

masquerade dance was not a fetish practice but a children's cultural party that keeps the Otuobhi community entertained during Christmas periods.

Notable among the elders who argued in favor of Oki was Chief Ase Wilberforce, the present paramount ruler of the community, he argued that Oki was not a fetish masquerade. He explained that, just as the Otuobhi community boys and girls travel to other communities in search of leisure and relaxation during Christmas periods, Oki masquerade is also used to entertain and attracts population to Otuobhi community during the Christmas periods. Based on Oki's entertainment preoccupation and local tourism potentials, Oki masquerade was not destroyed like the masquerades of other communities within the period of Rev Justice Aggo's community crusades. Below is Oki masquerade in its preparatory state. Boys and girls, men and women gather at the left end of the community in a creek call 'Obio. At Obio creek, a floating stage is constructed that ferries Oki and the other accompanied masquerades to Otuobhi community.



Plate 1: Oki masquerade in an aquatic performance

In the float is also contained the pilots that pilots the masquerade float in the company of other smaller boats. Though an aquatic masquerade, Oki performance does not honor the river spirits or deities. Laibations are not done to the venertion of any deity because the masquerade is strictly a play masquerade as the devotees termed it in Ogbia language "Ipo do lo". Ipo do lo means play masquerade. Unlike other water masquerades like the Ofuruma, the Oki masquerade does not restrict female and juvenail participations. Oki masquerade is an all inclusive masquerade that allows for the participation of all as it is seen in the picture here stated.



Plate 2: Oki Masquerade been floated to the community for performance.

At this point, the masquerade is been floated to the community for perfomance. As seen in the picture above, the pilot attached themselves to another boat which helps the float to move from Obio creek to the perfomance arena. The float is constructed with light floating soft logs called "Oboya" in Ogbia language. On top of the soft logs are atteched other soft plank woods to enable the masqueraders stand. The raffia leaves tied around the float is for spectacle, demarcating Oki the pivotal masquerade from the other smaller masquerades. The raffia leaves might represent a ritual symbol in the ritualistic masquerade model. For Oki masquerade, the raffia leaves are for aesthetics or as part of the Oki masquerade paraphanalia.



Plate 3: The Procession Boat of Oki

Reprsented in this figure is the procession boat of Oki. It carries boys, girl, men and women of Otuobhi community who are participants of the Oki masquerade dance. Other masquerades like Akpembe of Ewoi and Oburumadu of Emeyal 2 communities starts her procession to the performance arena from either the community field or town hall. Oki masquerade performance however, starts hers from the river accompanied by participants to the community play ground because of its aquatic disposition.



Plate 4: The arrival of Oki Masquerade at the community water front.

This picture tells a story of the arrival of Oki masquerade at the community water front. One spectacular aspected of the Oki performance is the observance of the water tide. The procession of Oki masquerade follows the ebb of the river. The significance of this is to allow the float stage float freely without struggle and to avoid possible distruction of the float stage by a strong tide. This is because the ebb of the tide in Otuobhi community propels the movement of the river from Obio creek towards the Otubbi community and it enhances smoot sailing of the masquerade float stage.



Pate 5: A dramatisation of a fisher man killing wild fishes

This picture potrays a dramatisation of a fisher man who kills all the wild fishes that do not allow other smaller fishes to servive in the rivrer ecosystem. The drama started by a circle dance by the participant, singing and clapping till the arrival of the pivotal masquerade Oki. At the appearance of Oki, every other masquerade goes into hiding for the fear of been killed by Oki. In the process of dancing round the arena, Oki kills all the smaller fishes in masquerade form and Oki is finally trapped and killed through a drag net. The death of Oki signals the climax and end of the Oki ma



Plate 6: Men, women and children in performance.

The picture here captures men, wome and children in performance. This signifies the social nature of the Oki masquerade. Unlike the ritualistic masquerade were participant are restricted to only initiates, the Oki social masquerade of the Otuobhi people is for all; men, women and children participation.

Social Peculiarities of the Oki Social Masquerade

The Oki masquerade of the Otuobhi community of Ogbia LGA, Bayelsat state, is one particular example of social masquerade in Nigeria. The main discourse here is that, the Oki masquerade is uncharacteristically social, performative, and inclusive that makes it different in terms of structure, purpose, and cultural role as compared to ritualistic masquerades. The distinctive features are:

i. Performance and Geographical Orientation

Oki masquerade is held on a floating stage on Obio creek, and it is accompanied to the community ground followed by participants (men, women, and children). The float motion is aligned to the tidal ebb in order to create a comfortable navigation and charisma of the performance. This water environment is part of the identity of Oki, a mixture of the riverine dynamics and dramatic presentation of the narrative of a wild fish that frightens the river ecosystem. Conversely, ritual masquerades like the Igbo Mmanwu, the Yoruba Egungun and Ibibio Ekpo are held in supposed holy, earthly grounds like shrines or groves. Their performances are confined to the initiates or the chosen individuals but the emphasis is on mediation of spiritual matter and not aesthetic performance as obtained in the Oki masquerade performance. The concept of Oki, floating on the water, and made available to all members of the community is an indication of the conscious rejection and rejection of ritual feature, and the focus on entertainment, inclusiveness and cultural performance over the maintenance of religious power.

ii. Secular Orientation Obligation

Oki is entirely secular. It presupposes no offering, libations and worship and is specifically created to be a form of play masquerade (Ipo do lo) used to entertain and relax the people collectively during the seasons of festivals (Osain Ekinani). Its plot is a dramaticization of a catch of a predatory fish, which is combined with morality, environmental consciousness, and recreation. Ritualistic masquerades, in their turn, are religious and devoid of these entertaining features. The Egungun is considered an ancestral spirits whereas Ekpo imposes communal discipline and

moral values. Participation in these masquerade performance is controlled and non-initiates, particularly women and children are often locked out to maintain a spiritual potency. The secular character of Oki masquerade, also disapproves the general misunderstanding that every masquerade is linked to rituals. Its absence of spiritual commitment and free involvement gives the culture of masquerade a new definition.

iii. Incursiveness and Community Inclusion.

The Oki masquerade of the Otuobhi community, is an example of social inclusiveness. As a contrast to the ritualistic masquerades, where the taking part of people is limited, Oki gives all; men, women, and children the opportunity to participate fully in the procession, dramatization, and. The strategy builds communal unity, intergenerational interaction, and communal pleasure in cultural identity. In contrast, ritualistic masquerades are organized in a way to preserve hierarchies and spiritual secrets. It is only accessible to initiates who have undergone training and women and children are usually not allowed to attend and people must sit so that they follow the sacred procedures. The participative openness of Oki represents an intentional social purpose with emphasis on communal entertainment, and continuation of cultures over ritual exclusivity that is a characteristic deviation in ritualistic masquerades.

iv. Narrative Focus and Dramatic Structures.

The Oki masquerade performance is a well-planned dramatization. The story of a vicious fish and its capture is performed through singing, drumming, dancing, and dramatizing. The play has an obvious start, breaking point, and denouement, and focuses on theatricality and narration instead of preaching. On the contrary, the ritual masquerades are concerned with symbolic and sacred communication that intermediates the sphere of life and the world of spirits. Instead of the dramatized stories to be entertained, Mmanwu, Egungun and Ekpo are dramatization of ancient and cosmic values. These narrative framework and elements of the Oki masquerade, including drama, music and community involvement, highlight why it is such a social masquerade. It is a show made more to entertain and illustrate morals, not to be spiritual ritual, which sets it quite apart, as compared to ritualistic forms.

On the whole, all signs point to the fact that, the Oki masquerade of the Otuobhi community is a peculiar social performance masquerade which is not only secular, inclusive, but also community-based. It is acted on a floating

stage on Obio creek and involves men, women, and children, which makes it easy to everyone to attend as compared to ritualistic masquerades that are practiced in limited sacred grounds. The story of the performance is that of a predatory fish and the process of its capture, which is sung, drummed, danced, dramatized, with its focus on entertainment, moral image rather than the spiritual or ritual ones. It has a secular costume, music and style of performance and there is no offering or worship. The masquerade creates a group of unity, intergenerational interaction and happiness, which shows its importance as a social institution. On the whole, the Oki masquerade dispatches the widely held view that all African masquerades are ritualistic in nature, demonstrating that social masquerades can flourish as participative, performative and culturally meaningful in the modern Ogbia society.

Recommendation

i. The Oki masquerade can be vigorously marketed as major cultural event in the festal seasons by capitalizing on the special aquatic performance, involvement of participation, and amusing storylines in order to attract tourists and enhance tourism and economy in the area.

ii. Scholars, cultural institutions, and community custodians should also provide detailed documentation of the performances, costumes, music, choreography, and narratives of Oki as a way of ensuring that the tradition is passed on to the future generation and also avoiding cultural erosion.

iii. The Oki masquerade must be included in school programs, community outreach workshops and cultural festivals to teach young generation about Ogbia heritage, as well as creating a link between the generations and instilling in the next generation its importance as social and cultural institution but not like a ritual.

Conclusion

The analysis has shown that, the Oki masquerade of the Otuobhi people of Ogbia is a unique social performance that questions the orthodox view of seeing all African masquerades as being ritualistic or spiritually guided. Its distinctive characteristics, such as water-based and visual action performance, not-religious inclination, consensus involvement regardless of gender and age, the dramatization based on stories and narrative, and flexible endurance are the aspects that help to emphasize its definition as a social masquerade that is aimed at

entertaining, educating, and unifying the community. This study brings out the diversity and flexibility of the masquerade culture in Ogbia and Nigeria, demonstrating that social masquerades are able to co-exist with spiritual forms without obliterating the cultural heritage. Finally, Oki is an example of how traditional performance could be transformed to the requirements of modern society, and still remain culturally relevant.

References

Abraye, Sunday Doutimiariye & Azobor, Gordon Tams "Dramatic and Spiritual Discourse of Aleibiri Festival Masquerade Dance of Bayelsa People." *RUN Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 2, 2018, pp. 84–95.

Agoro, Saviour Nathan. "The Demise of the Performance Art of Masquerade: A Case Study of the Phenomenon in Igbogene in Bayelsa State." *Stud Tribes Tribals*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2010, pp. 13–19.

Akwang, Etop. "Sign Field in Ekpo and Ekoon Masquerade of Ibibio." In D. Oni & S. E. Ododo (Eds.), *Technical Theatre and the Performing Art in Nigeria*. Lagos, NANTAP, 2011, pp. 39–53.

Amali, Abdulmalik Adakole. "Essence, Concept and Masquerade Performances of the Idoma People of Nigeria." *IRORO JOA*, Vol. 18, No. 1&2, 2019, pp. 283–298.

Amali, Abdulmalik Anatole. "Aesthetics of Costume and Colour in Idoma Masquerade Performance." *The Performer*, Vol. 16, No. 5, 2014, pp. 183–192.

Amange, Baimane Ephraim. *The Egugum Masquerade of the Ologoghe in Ogbia.* Unpublished MA Thesis, 2019.

Amankulor, James Ndukaku. "Ekpe Festival as Religious Ritual and Dance Drama." In Y. Ogunbiyi (Ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, Tanus Books Limited, pp. 138–157.

Ama-Ogbari, C. C. Ogbari. "Masquerade Culture: An Aspect of Nembe Cultural Heritage in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria." *South-South Journal of Humanities and International Studies*, October 2018, pp. 379–390.

Areo, Margaret Olugbemisola. "The Aesthetic and Dramaturgical Significance of Masquerade Performance in Edi Festival". In D. Oni & S.E. Odod, 2011,

Asigbo, Alex. "Transmutation in Masquerade Costumes and Performance: An Examination of Abuja Carnival 2010." *Journal of Arts and Humanities UNIZIK*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2012, pp. 1–13.

Asogwa, Odoja. "Social Dynamics and Resilience in the Northern Igbo Masking Tradition." *Cultural Arts Research and Development*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2022, pp. 39–49.

Dasylva, Ademola. *Dapo Adelugba on Theatre Practice in Nigeria*. Ibadan Cultural Study Group, 2007.

Ejeke, O. Solomon. "Culture and the Business of the Theatre." *Abraka Humanities Review*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2011, pp. 64–72.

Ekanem, Edikan. "Ekpo Masquerade and Its Activities in Akwa Ibom State: A Constitutional Appraisal." *OpinionNigeria.com*, 2016. Retrieved 2024.

Ekweariri, Chidiebere S. "Symbols and Meaning of Mask and Masquerade in African Theatre". Applause. Journal of Theatre and Media Studies. Vol. 1, No.2, 2006, pp. 75 -90.

Emiemokumor, Augustin. "Visual Art Form in Motion: Traditional African Masquerade as Theatrical Phenomenon." *MGBAKOIGBA: Journal of African Studies*, 2012, pp. 1–7.

Enekwe, Ossie Onuora. *Igbo Mask: The Oneness of Ritual and Theatre.* Lagos, Nigeria Magazine Publication, 1987.

Fai, Gilbert. "Soyinka and Yoruba Sculpture: Mask of Deification and Symbolism." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 44–49.

Mbachanga, Jonathan & Ukuma, Shadrach. "Cultural Ethos in Traditional African Performances: The Tiv Nyamtswan in Perspective." In S. E. Ododo (Ed.), *Fire Works for Lighting Aesthetician*, 2012, pp. 620–640.

Ogbonna, Mazi. "Igbo Masquerades and Their Importance to Society." *EKWE NDIGBO*, 29 August 2019.

Oguamanam, Charles et al. "Odo Masquerade in Northern Igbo Land: A Cultural Resource in Demise." *Journal of Tourism and Heritage Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2018, pp. 79–95.

Ogunba, Oyin. "Traditional African Festival Drama." In O. Ogunba & I. Abiola (Eds.), *The Theatre in Africa*, Ibadan University Press, 1978, pp. 3–26.

Okeke, Tochukwu. "Cultural Syncretism in Igbo Mask: An Example of the Ijele Mask." *IMSU Theatre Journal*, Vol. 2 No. 1, 2012, pp. 117–13.

Okpadah, Stephen Oghenerurο. "A Study of Festival Theater to Flekstival Theater..." *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2018, pp. 42–56.

Onuora, Nzekwu. "Masquerade." In Y. Ogunbiyi (Ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria*, 1981, pp. 131–135.

Ukala, Samuel. "Masquerade, Folktale and Literary Theatre of English Expression in Africa." In S. Ogude et al. (Eds.), *Eagle in Flight*, 1999, pp. 160–179.

Ukut, Ebong. Ekpo Society. *Heritage Journal*, Vol. 1(39), 1977.

Umoh, Dominic. "The Reality Behind the Mask in Ekpo Ikpaisong..." *Journal of Communication and Culture*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2011, pp. 101–108.

Victor, Fiyinfoluwa. "The Eyo Festival: Uncovering the Sacred Symbolisms..." Retrieved July 22, 2023.