

# THE PUSH FOR INCLUSION AND THE PULL OF EXCLUSION: THE IGBO AND CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE IN THE NIGERIAN NATION, 1970-2003

BY  
CHUKWUMA C. OPATA

## Abstract

Since the end of the Nigerian civil war in 1970, the Igbo people have been complaining of being marginalized in the nation's policy making. They often accuse other ethnic groups within the nation of using systemic imbalance to perpetuate injustices against the Igbo. Unfortunately, even though there are enough historical evidence to buttress the marginalization of the Igbo, such facts and reasons as adduced by the Igbo failed to address the genesis of the Igbo dilemma and to situate it properly so as to know if the problem is an Igbo creation or a deliberate ploy by other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria to undo the Igbo. Incidentally, except if this is done by the Igbo, their complaint would be ceaseless, thus leading to their crises of confidence in the nation.

As conflict resolution entails knowing the source, nature, structure and dimensions of each conflict with the aim of attaining a better and relatively conflict free situation, this paper is intended to reorient the Igbo. This done, the psychological disposition of most Igbo would change, thus making room for easier resolution and hence political stability. This can only be done when the accuser(s)- the Igbo- interrogate themselves and see how they had contributed to their dilemma in the polity called Nigeria through their actions and inactions.

**Key words:** Inclusion, Exclusion, Crisis, Confidence, Igbo, Nigeria.

## Introduction

It would be apposite to streamline certain issues at the onset of this discourse. First, what do we mean by crisis of confidence? To what extent has it hampered the Igbo quest for inclusion in the nation's polity, thus engendering in them a sense of exclusion? People are said to experience or have crisis of confidence when their faith and consciousness make them to have doubts and develop negative thoughts on issues that they have stakes in. Quite often, they are led by their thoughts to believe that they are "unwanted". This becomes worrisome when such notions are held for a long time and transferred from one generation to another. That this is the case of the Igbo frame of mind in relation to their existence in Nigeria would be illustrated by the following observations made by very influential Igbo people, and some writers of Igbo extraction.

In 2006, *The Sky*, vol.3 observed as follows:

Since the civil war ended in 1970, we were told no victor, no vanquish, but we do know that Igbo were defeated roundly and comprehensively. The "No" gimmick is only a political masterstroke from chief Awolowo. It was the hand of Esau but the voice of Jacob!



The writer went on to ask; has the Igbo as a race been rehabilitated? Why do we (Igbo) still play second-class citizen role in everything we do here? The Igbo, the writer alleged "has been treated badly in this country as far as leadership is concerned". Even the Oha-na-Eze ndi Igbo (an apex socio-political organization that serves as the mouth piece of the Igbo) in its petition to The Human Rights Violations Investigating Committee popularly known by Nigerians as the Oputa Panel, could not escape expressing their lack of faith in Nigeria and its government. Thus, Professor Ben Nwabueze, a constitutional lawyer of international repute in his foreword to the text-the petition- noted that the entire Nigerian polity is fatally sick and in dire need of radical surgery, of thorough restructuring, which only a national conference can provide<sup>2</sup>. Professor Ben Nwabueze was the then secretary – General of the Oha-na-Eze. In the preface to the same petition, Comrade Uche Chukwumwereije, a one time senator and the chief propagandist of the defunct Biafra, who served as Chairman, Planning and Strategic Committee of the body observed that "it sounds ironic that Oha-na-Eze did not eagerly jump up for a petition immediately after the Oputa Commission was set up, it was because of our initial reservations about the sincerity of the Federal Government"<sup>3</sup>. Even a foremost Igbo historian, Professor A.E.Afigbo made a similar observation. He observed that:

...in talking about the infringement of Igbo rights, we are concerned not with unconscious evil, evil committed in a fit of absence of mind, but with deliberate, conscious evil..., the systematic mistreatment of the Igbo since the end of the Biafran War in 1970- all these are cases of deliberate evil<sup>4</sup>.

In 2007, the leader of the defunct Biafra, Emeka Ojukwu made a statement that captured the frame of mind of the average Igbo man that his continued stay in the federation called Nigeria was not to his interest. He stated that;

A man to whom the state brings no benefit has every right and indeed is obliged to question the oneness of that state if perforce it must include him. For a man to whom unity remains that of a Jonah in the belly of a whale, that man must question his situation. He is not comfortable in the whale's belly. It is dark, it is soggy. He wants to be out least he dies. This man ghowes it to himself to get out despite the fact that the whale has no comfort. To this man in extreme lies the obligation to quit<sup>5</sup>.

It therefore behooves on any researcher on Igbo sense of frustration and loss of confidence to know who the "whale" is- the Federal Government or the Igbo themselves.

### **An Analysis of the Complaints of the Igbo**

From the above citations, no one is in doubt as to whether the Igbo as a group have lost confidence in Nigeria as a nation- state. In line with the Igbo practice during investigations, we have to ask "kedu ebe mmiri si banye opi ugbogiri"- from where did water follow to enter the pumpkin. In trying to find this out, attention would be paid to events that gave



rise to the sense of frustration among the Igbo. Also, using Igbo paradigms, the question would be, would the Igbo act differently if they found themselves on the other side of the divide?

One of the complaints of the Igbo in 1970 relates to the Banking Obligation (Eastern State) Decree 1970. The said decree cancelled all bank deposits operated in the old Eastern Region except Calabar between May 31, 1967 and January 12, 1970. Through this decree, every depositor was paid twenty pounds (£20), notwithstanding the amount deposited<sup>6</sup>. That this sounds callous is not in doubt, but any action explained outside the context and circumstance is bound to yield a faulty conclusion. On that note, it should be pertinent to observe that the Federal Government was relatively fair with respect to the said decree and its implementation. If they had honored the account fully, it would imply tacit support for Biafra. That would have raised the question as to why they fought for thirty months. For the Igbo, one of their proverbial wisdoms gives credence to the action of the Federal Government. Among the Igbo, the saying *ala muoo machiri anaghi ahu ire ogu-a* land sanctioned by the gods do not witness farm work or put another way, a land that had an injunction placed on it by the oracles should not expect to eat from the soil owned by the oracles. Therefore, one may argue that the Federal Government was fair to the Igbo as they used Igbo worldview to apply to Igbo case.

When in 1971 the Federal Government banned the importation of certain items into Nigeria, some Igbo people saw the ban as targeted against the Igbo. Canvassing this view, P.O.Obi-Ani observed that:

The Igbo people were disappointed when the Federal Government prohibited in 1971 importation of second hand clothing, even though it allowed the importation of brandy, whisky, gambling and gaming machines and beer. ... But it was the ban on the second-hand clothing that impinged terribly on the life of the ordinary Igbo people. Before the civil war, some Igbo people businessmen had specialized and indeed monopolized trade in second-hand clothing and stockfish. The ban was intended in part to frustrate any attempt by the Igbo to reestablish these lines of business with foreign partners after the war<sup>7</sup>.

Implicit in the above conclusion is the notion that the ban was a deliberate attempt to witch-hunt the Igbo. For such notions to be justified, one must ask if other ethnic nationalities and their citizens were encouraged to import those prohibited items. Were such items used by the Igbo only? Were there arrangements made before to provide for other ethnic groups before this order was implemented? Evidence before the present writer in the form of written government documents had not proved the notion of witch-hunting the Igbo true in this case. Therefore, to perpetuate such views without subjecting them to rational judgment would amount to estranging the Igbo through fundamentally wrong assumptions. Such stances breed conflicts, which are difficult to resolve as it is founded on prejudice, which is difficult to accept reason.



It therefore becomes worrisome that the Oha-na Eze Ndigbo made up of some Igbo egg heads are of the view that the 1971 Federal Government ban on the importation of second hand clothing and stockfish was calculated to throw the ordinary Igbo masses whose livelihood depended on petty trade into penury and disarray<sup>8</sup>. Another question raised by this view is, are the Igbo the only people engaged in petty trading in Nigeria? When a group reacts negatively to an issue that affects every other group and interprets it to mean victimization, such group is calling undue attention to itself. Such calls make observers to see them as arrogating to themselves the status of the spokesman of the nation albeit unsolicited. The tendency is to dismiss them as noisemakers and even when they have genuine cases, the attention given to them and sympathy they draw is reduced. On this note, it would be apposite to say that this is one of the reasons why the Igbo often complain of exclusion in the nation's decision making process.

In their petition to the Oputa Panel, the Igbo rightly observed that no regime has betrayed so much disdain for the rights of Ndi Igbo in its appointments as the Obasanjo regime. They went ahead to substantiate this claim by stating that in the National Security Council, there is no Igbo representation. This they argued contravened section 14(3) of the 1999 Constitution especially as paragraph (1) of section 25 of part 1,3rd schedule of the same constitution that deal with the composition of the National Security Council provides that two additional members may be appointed to the National Security Council at the presidents' discretion<sup>9</sup>. Disturbing as this might be, the Igbo cannot be exonerated from contributing to this malady. It is on record that even in the face of these facts, Igbo members of the National Assembly, even when a person of Igbo extraction was the Senate President, never brought pressure to bear on the nation on this matter. To worsen the matter for themselves, Igbo members of the National Assembly went ahead and approved Obasanjo's list of Ministerial nominees. Incidentally, the Igbo whom they claim to represent complained that they were short-changed in the number of cabinet ministers as no ministry under group B were allotted to the South-East geo-political zone(Igboland). This writer is yet to read from any national daily that these legislators of Igbo extraction opposed the list but were over ruled or that they staged a walk out during deliberations on the list to register their protest and displeasure. This begs the question, who is cheating who? My answer to the latter question is that even if other groups in Nigeria deliberately wanted to deny the Igbo their rights, the Igbo through their representatives gave support to them, so why complain?

Thus, Prof.A.E.Afigbo was correct when he stated that in talking of reparation and restitution for the Igbo, that which the Igbo nation and people owe themselves should not be overlooked<sup>10</sup>. In line with Afigbo's observation, it would be nice to see and also prove the ways and manner the Igbo had contributed to their predicament. This would help in proving to them that the first step towards a true national reconciliation is for them to conduct an in-house cleaning of themselves. The Igbo through Oha-na -Eze lamented that the roads in the five states of the South-East have been acknowledged as the worst in the federation<sup>11</sup>. That this is true is not in doubt as is evident in one of the articles in Ogbu Opi, vol.1, No.2 of April, 2003<sup>12</sup>. The said article did a summary of national roads rehabilitation and construction programs from 1999 to 2001. In the write-up, it was observed that in the entire five South-Eastern states (the bulk of the states where the Igbo are found) only one road



project was completed while in the South-West eight were completed; the North-Central had five projects completed. As for on-going or uncompleted road projects, there were thirteen in the south-east, twenty five in the South-South, fourteen in the South-West and eleven in the North-Central. These data speak for themselves. However, what Oha-na-Eze failed to state is why the roads in the South-East remained the worst in the federation. They were content with the excuse that “the Federal Government was unwilling to repair them”.

One is forced to react differently to this issue of bad roads in Igboland if the revelation of Senator Ogunlewe, a one time minister for Works in Nigeria is taken seriously. Ogunlewe enthused that;

The bad roads in the South East span over 20 years of neglect...out of the 345 engineers in this ministry (works) 187 of them are from the South East. Out of a total of 67 assistant directors, 35 of them are from the South East. From 1979 to 1983 and thereafter, the person that was the director here was from the South East. For the past 15years, no reputable contractor was allowed to handle any of the projects. Two, most of the contractors are from the South East<sup>13</sup>.

Ogunlewe's observation is revealing as it gives one a clue to who the “whale” is. From his observation, it could be observed that within the twenty years of neglect, an Igbo was the director of works in the nation. This was during the Second Republic. The Igbo as at the time of Ogunlewe's report which coincided with their period of complaint constituted more than half of the engineers in the ministry in charge of roads(works) and also more than half of the assistant directors in the ministry were of Igbo extraction. Of greater importance is the fact that most of the contractors who executed the jobs regarded as shoddy in the South East hail from the South East. Let me ask, how best can a government prove its sincerity to a group that feels they are sidelined than to tell the citizens of such groups to take charge of their constituents after providing the needed funds and logistic support? Who do we blame when such a person(s) executed the jobs badly- the contractor or the government? Even if government is to be blamed for certifying the contract, the Igbo are still not free of the blame. This is because they constituted more than fifty per cent of the engineers who approved of such contractors and certified their jobs. If one desecrates his “temple” and beckons on another person to sanctify it, without first acknowledging his faults, the “gods of the temple” turns down his prayers. This is very true of the Igbo in Nigeria.

If anything, the way and manner the Igbo had conducted themselves contributed to their woes more than any other factor. Thus, Prof. Afigbo was right to observe that in the final analysis, the ultimate explanation for the suffering of the Igbo nation and people is powerlessness, abject powerlessness, and abject organizational powerlessness<sup>14</sup>. That the Igbo are the least organized ethnic nationality in Nigeria is not in doubt. Their organizational powerlessness is promoted by their love of crass individualism. They are in most cases engaged in infighting, even on issues of national interest and importance. During the party primaries in preparation for the 2003 elections, the demand for a Nigeria president of Igbo extraction was high in Igboland. Yet, some Igbo sons were busy shopping for the office of



the Vice President. For instance, within the All Nigerian Peoples' Party, (ANPP), Dr. Chuba Okadigbo, a politician of high repute, decided to have an agenda totally different from that of the Igbo and this led him to accept to become General Buhari's running mate. This was a case of personal ambition over taking group ambition.

Okadigbo probably borrowed this idea from Ekwueme. Prof. Omo Omoruyi in an article titled "The 'Ndigbo Question in Nigerian Politics is real' 111, Solution: Igbo Should Return To PDP or NPP", observed that it was preparatory to the Second Republic politics that gave rise to Ohaneze Ndigbo which today parade itself ostensibly as an umbrella body. This body (Ohaneze) it should be remembered never arose out of the desire to advance Igbo course from a collective front rather it was a separatist group that arose due to the contest between Jim Nwobodo, Dr. Alex Ekwueme and Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe. While Zik wanted to reposition the Igbo through a political party (Nigerian Peoples Party-NPP) that would not place the Igbo as second class citizens in Nigeria, Ekwueme wanted and actually did align himself with a National Movement that gave the Igbo second class status. This Movement later metamorphosed into the National Party of Nigeria (NPN). The vision of Ohaneze was to have an Igbo leader who would challenge and eventually replace Zik<sup>15</sup>. This they found in Ekwueme. Thus, the movement today called Oha-na-Eze had external backing from those the Igbo had been in contest for political and economic advantage in the polity called Nigeria.

A fundamental error committed by those who floated Ohaneze was that they never considered the interest of the greater percentage of Igbo people and neither did they marry such interest with Igbo experiences since the civil war in a way that would unite rather than polarize them. The very name Ohaneze suggests that greater percentage, if not all Igbo were privy to the establishment of the body. This is very far from reality.

The cases in many states of Igboland between supposed leaders are signs that what obtains in Igboland is a divided house. The saga between former Governors Chinwoke Mbadinuju and Emeka Offor, Chris Ngige and Chris Uba in Anambra State, Jim Nwobodo and Chimaroke Nnamani in Enugu state are glaring examples of infighting among the leadership of the Igbo.

## **Conclusion**

For any conflict to be resolved effectively, the parties in the conflict must first embark on an "in-house cleansing of self". This would allow them change their earlier views and make room for them to shift their grounds. Once a party is so self-opinionated, it becomes difficult for it accept blames. This makes conflict resolution difficult. Therefore, the essence of this paper is to conduct such an "in-house cleansing". As history wears two garbs - what happened and an attempt to reconstruct what happened, and is seen as the celebration of experience in the context of analysis, <sup>16</sup> it behooves on the historian to restore justice and confidence by eliminating the source of conflict which in this case is a wrong understanding of the contributions of the Igbo to their dilemma in the Nigerian nation.

In the light of the evidence before us, it would be germane to state that the attitude of the Igbo in Nigeria as a group is questionable and even abhorred by some Igbo. Since divides occurs within their folk, it would be nice for them to put their house in order. The truth remains that any group in Nigeria that has internal cohesion always succeeded at the national



level. Also, those who have the interest of their people at heart and sincerely at that, in most cases got what they needed. In Igboland what we have is what late Professor Onuora Ossie Enekwe would call “big fish eat small fish, big men small men, in the belly of the night”.<sup>17</sup> Worse of it all, “the big fish” that eat “small fish” in Igboland are those who parade themselves as Igbo leaders. The Igbo are crying of marginalization, yet they pave way for mediocrity to thrive in their midst. The latter stance is more pronounced during federal appointments where sometimes the candidates whose names are sent for consideration by the Presidency and the National Assembly were altered by people of Igbo extraction who claim to be “Gate keepers of power in the Temple of the Gods”. Where a State Caucus of a political parties list is turned down at the national level begs some serious question especially when the person at the leadership belongs to the same party. In the current Federal Executive Council of President Goodluck Jonathan, Enugu State suffered this fate as the name of Professor Barth Nnaji did not make the State list of ministerial nominees, yet he is current minister for Power. This is a clear case of “do it your own way” prevalent in Igboland today which negates Igbo sense of Unity as encapsulated in one of their proverbial wisdoms; *Igwe bu ike* (unity is strength). Hence, one is forced to toe the line of Ozoemena Nwanzugbe who said that *Igbo n’eme Onwoha* (the Igbo are their own problem). This truism is yet to be countered. So rather than point accusing fingers at other ethnic groups, the Igbo should have a re-think and put their house in order. The Igbo are shouting of marginalization, yet some of them help in disempowering their homelands with their settler mentality by establishing big businesses that generate employment and revenue for their host state while they do not have even a retail shop in their home towns. This scenario paints a picture of refugee millionaires.

Until the Igbo come to realize that Nigeria as it stands today is sitting on a volatile keg of very dry gunpowder that can catch fire any time and that other ethnic nationalities like the Yoruba are already making plans for their integration and follow the same path, they would be taken unawares even when they are aware. This would increase their sense of frustration. A stitch in time they say saves nine.

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# Social Change and Omabe: A Critical Ethnography

By  
Chidi Ugwu

## Abstract

As cultural objects, masks have been used in many parts of the world in different periods. Studies of the masking tradition among many Igbo and other African groups have mainly focused on the forms and roles that their various masking forms assume. However, as a tradition, masquerade has also got its share of the post-contact changes that now characterize most local communities the world over. Employing ethnographic techniques, this study investigated how these changes have affected Omabe (the masking tradition of the Nsukka-Igbo of southeast Nigeria), and explored the possibilities that these changes might present within contemporary circumstances.

## Introduction

Etymologically the term 'masquerade' implies a form of disguise. Its original meaning has always involved a mask which is an object that is frequently worn over or in front of the face to hide the identity of a person and by its own features to establish another being.<sup>1</sup> This essential characteristic of hiding and revealing characters or moods is common to most masks. The essence of this social phenomenon in many parts of Africa can hardly be captured by the term 'masquerade' as researchers, such as Picton,<sup>2</sup> have observed. We may, however, make do with it while employing appropriate local terms to enhance contextualization and proper grasp.

As cultural objects, masks are noticed to have been used in many parts of the world in different periods since the Stone Age and have been as varied in appearance as in their use and symbolism.<sup>1</sup> Masking forms among the Igbo have been variously studied.<sup>3-9</sup> Studies of forms of masking among other Nigerian groups include Horton among the Kalabari of southern Nigeria,<sup>10</sup> Beier among the Yoruba,<sup>11</sup> Isichei in southern Zaria,<sup>12</sup> Bentor in some Niger-Delta and southeast Nigerian communities,<sup>13</sup> and so on. Meek,<sup>14</sup> Onyeneke<sup>15</sup> and Aniako<sup>16,17</sup> have particularly studied the Nsukka variant. However, these have mainly focused on the forms and roles that these various masking forms assume: those held to embody deities or spirits and to which sacrifices and supplications were made to assure the fertility of land and people; those held to embody the ancestral spirits; those that placated the spirits through their music and dance; those that enforced measures of social control; and those that performed principally as entertainers. In some cases, more than one of these functions may be embodied in a particular masking form. In other words, the Igbo masking tradition may be said to be a total social fact – bringing into play the whole society and its institutions: legal, economic, political, religious and aesthetic. The studies already identified contain striking details of these forms and functions, and so need not delay us here. Our instant task is to consider the challenges and possibilities that the pressures of culture contact and change might present to the masking tradition among local communities, with a focus on the Nsukka case.



## **Study setting**

The locus of the study is a local community, Nsukka, in southeast Nigeria. It is one of the communities that bear peculiar, although mutually intelligible, Igbo dialects lying at the border between northern and southern regions of Nigeria. It is about 70 kilometers north of Enugu, the administrative headquarters of Enugu state. It comprises three quarters or sub-units, Nkp'nano, Nru and Ihen'Owere, with 80 villages all-together and a 2011 projected population of 347, 337. Nsukka, being a border community, began to see the British plenipotentiaries traverse northward and southward of the area now known as Nigeria from mid-19th centuries<sup>18</sup>. However, colonial administration began to be entrenched there in 1906<sup>19</sup>. Thenceforth, Nsukka has continued to change and assume more diversity in views and values, population and socio-cultural patterns. Highly influential introduced institutions such as Christianity and Western-style schooling, and the attendant influx of sojourners for purposes of Western education and commerce are significant factors that have occasioned such changes. These are in addition to new/extraneous ideas and values brought in by the western-style mass media (local and international).

I have lived in Nsukka for some three decades as a functional member of the community. My residence was in Umudikwu, a village in Ihe n'Owerre, one of its three sub-units. The village borders the University of Nigeria (set up in 1960), and people thronging from far and near on account of having any dealings with the institution were common in that neighbourhood. The presence of the university also spawned a number of concomitant establishments and activities which added to the quick urbanization or, some would say, modernization of the area. In any case, it was in such a plural setting of sorts that I grew up. Traditional patterns of responses to such events that remain common to all human groups like deaths, quarrels, brawls, bouts of sickness, etc. have been here diluted or modified by the heterogeneity of its current population makeup. The latter-day contacts of culture have seen radical changes among the Nsukka but our focus here is on the challenges and possibilities that these changes present for their masking tradition.

## **Data collection**

Unobtrusive full-participant observation was the principal data collection technique for the study. I have observed the Nsukka group life, as a functional member of the community, for about three decades, as already mentioned. However, older members were interviewed on different occasions for clarifications on issues that were unlikely for me to observe firsthand in their more original forms. On the whole, nine elders were interviewed on different occasions. The questions were raised based on the particular matter which required clarifications at the moment. The choice of each was based on availability. The data garnered through observation and the interviews were compared and crosschecked with literature. The datedness of literature used, it must be said, portrays the moments when important studies of this phenomenon were undertaken.

## **Findings and discussion**

### **Masks in Nsukka**

Ma is a polysemantic Nsukka term that may mean, in different contexts, ghost/spirit, deity or masquerade. Ma, when it refers to masquerade, subsumes basically two categories



that appear in different contexts, playing different roles and bearing different appellations. There are akatakpa and ekpe,<sup>20</sup> dramatizing male and female forms respectively. The latter is splendidly adorned while the former is made to appear grotesque and frightening, perhaps to protect the latter. The akatakpa and ekpe emerge during post-burial ceremonies, having come from the underworld to represent the ancestors, and to lead home the deceased who is only held to have been transformed and not necessarily dead. The other category, which is our focus, is omabe. It is the one for whose appearing very elaborate festivities and merriments are made. The forms under this are oriokpa, echaricha, edzi, ishi ma, og'ri owa-ekwu, ajija and nwa dzi arua.

The three sub-communities take turns to host omabe which visits in the early months and stays on the host-community's land until late in the year. The "hosting right" goes round, getting to each of the three sub-communities once in three years. A major difference that may be established between akatakpa and ekpe on the one hand and omabe on the other is that whereas the former appear because a celebration is taking place, celebrations take place because the latter is appearing. As already said, details on omabe appearance and performances have been shown by some writers already mentioned above. Our focus here is on the impact culture contact has pulled on it.

### **Impact of social change**

As a tradition, the Nsukka omabe has also got its share of the post-contact changes that now characterize most local communities the world over. Reports on the original functions their native masking forms used to perform have been reported by Charles Meek, a British government ethnographer who worked in the 1920s before westernization shot wide roots. Chike Aniako<sup>16</sup> has also done an important study on the Nsukka Omabe. Austin Onyeneke's *The Dead Among the Living*<sup>21</sup> also contains reports on the Nsukka Omabe although not as detailed on it as in the former two. These functions of the omabe include those of the embodiment of ancestral spirits to whom supplications might be made, the enforcement of social control measures, and entertainment. However, these original roles have been influenced by social change, driven by factors such as urbanization, the introduction of the Western-style forms of government and justice system, Western education, Christianity, mass media (local and international), travels abroad of some Nsukka persons, and sojourning individuals that have become part of the mix of the population of Nsukka.

It is clear that an important element in the social control function of the omabe is the mask: the "unidentity" of the being behind the mask helped to conquer the fear of possible reprisal by the victim of any communal punishment enforced by omabe. The very genius of the phenomenon in this regard perhaps was that the familiarity that characterized communal life might make it hard for a human being to execute judgment on their neighbor or friend eye-ball to eye-ball. The omabe (the oriokpa in this case) was then employed as the impersonal enforcer of verdicts that had been unanimously passed by the community. This function has, however, been largely lost at the advent of western-style juridical system and its overarching role as the dispenser of justice within the framework of the modern state that came with British colonization. For example, instances now exist of clashes between the police and the omabe performers. It is even now common to find the police chasing and



arresting the performers. Individuals who are materially well off have also sometimes invited their hefty body-guards to accost performers, even when the performance was still on. The case is now such that consultations are on between the traditional Nsukka people and the police regarding possible compromises on ways to carry on.

Furthermore, converts to the received faiths reject everything about the omabe performances on the grounds of their being the devil's incarnate and their followership "idolatry". So, the omabe, which the converts have now come to see as monstrosities, are then taken as sure manifestations of the devil. So, for them, complete rejection and flight (or even attack on occasions) should be the "divine mandate" of the convert. For example, at present, the oriokpa appears on Sundays that fall on orie, one of the four Igbo market days (once in a lunar month). Clashes are seen to occur as it sometimes whips some of those coming from Sunday mass or other church activities: the very set of people that have lost all shreds of regard for it. On a certain Sunday in early 2006, an oriokpa was pursued by a drove of the catholic faithful (who now are more in number than the traditionalists) at the behest of a catholic priest, caught and unmasked in the glare of publicity...and nothing else happened. Few years earlier, this act would have resulted in catastrophic clashes.

Furthermore, with how Christianity was received among the Nsukka – in a way that would predispose the convert to reject everything thought to have any connections with their autochthonous expressions of relationship with the supernatural – it was difficult for the role of the omabe as sentry and enhancer of community solidarity to be sustained. In this regard, something that portrayed theatre took place in mid-2006 in Umudikwu village, the sub-community. A certain reverend father, who was acclaimed to embody the Holy Spirit, came to the village. He had been invited by the zealous converts who had managed to convince others that his coming would end the misfortunes attending them because of the misdeeds of their forebears; it would as well incapacitate all the sorcerers in the village. As the occasion wore on, his enthusiastic followers, having been charged to a frenzied state, began to despoil all sacred objects in the village seen as belonging to the old "pagan" ways. The Atama odo (the priest of odo, a certain deity in the village that has oracular status across the entire Nsukka) brought all the appurtenances of the deity in his custody out into the circus, where they were set ablaze. His reason was that all had taken to the Christian faith, leaving him with no followers, no adherents to the deity. A large wooden slit drum bitten during mortuary rites of respectable elders (termed obonyi), belonging to the odo, was also sent to the flames. The ulo ma (literally the house of spirit, the usually big hut from which the omabe emerges and in which its music is played) was bitten down. Almost all the elders of the village were present, offering a sort of unwilling consent to what looked somewhat like a sad inevitability. Such ravages have been the case with not just the masking tradition but other areas of the Nsukka traditional life; and obviously so across most Igbo and African groups today.

Furthermore, it has also to be noted that it is always the young men, the *crème* of the omabe, that set out in search of better opportunities in the cities and overseas. Many of them now, at best, see it as nothing beyond aesthetics. When they return, some, especially the more zealous converts to extraneous value systems, see the tradition as part of the "fetish" survivals of their "animistic" past and a depiction of "rural backwardness". Some culture-



conscious others only do as much as exhort those domicile in the village to do their best to ensure that their masking tradition does not die.

### **What do we do with omabe in these times?**

It has to be noted that the way the Nsukka, much like most other Igbo and African groups, have carried on has made it only a wishful thinking to suppose that the religious and political functions of their masking tradition can be restored. The realities of their present plural setting seem to have taken these over. It has to be observed, in any case, that some communities bordering the Nsukka area such as Enugu-Ezike, Ibagwa, Obollo, Orba, etc. still try to enact the traditional social control roles of their masking system in addition to the theatricals. In some of those places, masquerades may still organize to pounce on a recalcitrant (although very wealthy ones are always overlooked for fear of their backstairs influence in the latter-day multi-ethnic state setting).

Nevertheless, there seems to be a surprising amount of resurgence among the young generation of Nsukka towards the omabe festivities. This new awareness seems to have come at a period when the elders, who are the chief repositories of all arcane rituals regarding the tradition, had all "panicked" into the churches. Part of the reason for this is their fear of the "fire of hell" presented by the new faith as what would attend idolatry (which they had been convinced by the Christian proselytizers that their omabe performance was). But that is not their major fear. Their major fear is that of excommunication by their respective churches. In this vein, what those who are Catholics among these elders seem to fear the most will be the priest's refusal to precede them to the grave when they are dead. (This new phenomenon in their mortuary protocol can form the subject for another study.)

In any case, what one now sees among the Nsukka is a yawning gap between the older generation which had, at least in practical terms, given up on the omabe, and the upcoming one now laboring to restore aspects that are yet to be lost. What one does not see is a continuum of age-sets through which traditions are naturally passed down the line. On occasions, however, one or two "courageous" elders might be seen offering corrections on certain aspects as the performances go on. Where this always happens is in costuming, and in the percussive music which is an important concomitant of omabe performances. Most other elders stay away, wringing their hands in despair and complaining about how westernization swept away everything they held dear. There is a feature that seems to run common to all post-contact societies that fail to hold out in a struggle to keep their prized ways: they always realize the value of what they are losing too late to recover them.

### **Conclusion**

Among the Nsukka, like in many other Igbo groups, things regarding the masking tradition are now done in a way that shows it to have lost the ritual aura that used to place it in the realm of an unquestionable arbiter and dispenser of justice. Today, during omabe events, it is common to find city sojourners returning to witness it. But much of the omabe's impact now ends in the gay and merry mood it rouses among the people. In the legal and political domains, much to keep the omabe potent may have been lost. Nevertheless, social progress, it seems, would only be better if it means modifying locally grown social strategies



such as the masking tradition to keep much of its potency alive, especially when the ones introduced from outside are continually seen to lack the character to be actually effective: this has been the trend amongst other sensible post-contact societies. Ottenberg<sup>22</sup> has narrated how Native Americans (known popularly as Indians) in recent years have gone back to the writings of anthropologists, historians, travelers, missionaries and others to relearn and revive their own traditions; how they have gone to museums to pour over the material objects of their past stored there in order to understand their past cultures; how they have sometimes succeeded in having artifacts of their culture returned to their home area, to museums that they themselves have constructed. They are also said to have had their own scholars trained professionally as historians, anthropologists, museum curators and in other fields, who have become the intellectuals of their own traditions and are passing their knowledge onto their own people, sometimes including their ancient language. The more important thing to mention is that they are said to be leveraging on relevant aspects of that knowledge system in the modeling of their present society. Similar actions in India and Cuba are what have put them ahead of many in the domain of medicine. Their current

proress in that sphere has been shown to owe a lot to their considerable success in successfully harnessing appropriate indigenous knowledge and effectively blending it the received biomedical system.<sup>23</sup> It is clear that human groups who have succeeded in the present order of the world are those who carefully guard their own useful local possessions while appropriately borrowing from outside, that which they need but do not have.

Returning to our instant case, it should be mentioned that the art and theatricals of not just the Nsukka masking tradition in particular but the Igbo in general are so thrilling that they can catch almost anybody's fancy. These, with good planning, can be tapped into as live exhibition media. And this may set off a process which can bring entertainment, employment and wealth through tourism and art value to the area. Cases where comparable things have been done with similar, and even other pre-contact, traditions are well known in Nigeria. The Argungu and the Eyo festivals in some parts of the country are well known cases.

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