

Social Change and Omabe: A Critical Ethnography

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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.¹ 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,² 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.¹ Masking forms among the Igbo have been variously studied.³⁻⁹ Studies of forms of masking among other Nigerian groups include Horton among the Kalabari of southern Nigeria,¹⁰ Beier among the Yoruba,¹¹ Isichei in southern Zaria,¹² Bentor in some Niger-Delta and southeast Nigerian communities,¹³ and so on. Meek,¹⁴ Onyeneke¹⁵ and Aniako^{16,17} 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 centuries¹⁸. However, colonial administration began to be entrenched there in 1906¹⁹. 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 Ihen'Owere, 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,²⁰ 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 Aniako¹⁶ has also done an important study on the Nsukka Omabe. Austin Onyeneke's *The Dead Among the Living*²¹ 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. Ottenberg²² 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

pro prowess 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.²³ 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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