

THE ABULE AND ATAWA EKEJI MASQUERADE PERFORMANCES IN IGALA AS MACHINERY FOR SOCIAL CONTROL

By

Felix U. Egwuda-Ugbeda

Igala is a people as well as a language spoken by the people, that is, abo Igala (the Igala people) and Ichi Igala (the Igala language). The Igala are found in Kogi, Edo, Delta, Anambra, Enugu and Benue States of Nigeria. The Igala form the largest population in Kogi State, numbering about 1.6 million people (2006 population census figure).

The Igala society is well structured from the family to clan, community/village to the societal level. Attah Igala is the father of all Igala and the head of the monarchy. The well structured system of Igala government led to a fast expansion of Igala kingdom towards the end of the 19th century. In this view, Okwoli asserts that:

The Igala kingdom was one of the largest and strongest kingdoms in the present geographical boundary called Nigeria. The Kingdom covered Nupe country in the present Niger State, part of Ebirra in Kogi State, parts of Anambra, Delta and Enugu States (56).

Ijeoma accentuates this point by observing that, "the Igala monarchy has sometimes been described as one of the classic examples of divine kingship in Africa (19). In the same direction Ukwedeh further states that;

The emergence of the Attah dynasty constituted a major turning point in the history of the Niger-Benue Confluence Area. It involved unprecedented economic, social, political and cultural changes, which produced the Igala kingdom. (67)

The Igala cosmology stipulates that there are forces that control the affairs of Igala man. Among the Igala, there is nothing on earth that is not controlled by a supernatural forces. For instance, the birth of a child, his growth into maturity to old age and death, are controlled by the supernatural powers. Also, it is deemed that sickness, good health, failure, success, poverty, riches, underachievement, achievement, life and death are all controlled by some powers beyond our knowledge. Similarly, natural occurrences such as seasonal change, rainfall, sunshine, dry season, wet season, the planting and the harvesting of crops are all said to be in firm control of these powers. Then, if one may ask, what are these powers, where are these powers and who are these powers? In Igala cosmology and view of the world these powers exist in the spirit world, the world where human beings have a limited knowledge of. The Igala believe that, at the apex of this world, is Ojọ. Ojọ is the almighty God who is the creator of heaven and earth and everything in them. He is the supreme being with absolute power, the power that controls all other spirits as well as human beings. It is believed that Ojọ resides in Ojale which is heaven, from where he controls the affairs of all other spirits both benevolent and malevolent. It is Ojọ that causes life and death. He controls

the seasons, crops, nature and both spirit and human worlds. Apart from Ojo, the Igala believe in other spirits. They believe that there are different types of spirits and that these spirits are either benevolent or malevolent. One of the spirits that the Igala have so much regard for is the spirit of the dead known by the Igala as Abegwu, that is, the ancestral spirits. Abegwu are the dead Igala who after their death left behind the mortal bodies which are perishable and which are buried. To the Igala, what now transforms into the ancestral spirit is the soul of man. It is believed that the spirit of the dead does not depart from his relations on the earth; that there is a bilateral relationship between the ancestral spirits and the living Igala. This bilateral relationship first of all manifests in dreams then through the Ifa oracle and through rituals/rites and sacrifices. It is believed that in dreams, the dead can easily get in touch with their relations where, in some cases, certain information or the knowledge of particular events or occurrence could be revealed. In Ifa oracle, the Ifa priest usually stands in the gap between the living and the dead. The Ifa oracle is consulted (Ifa ebọ) so that both the past the present and the future events are unfolded. It is the Ifa oracle that reveals to the Igala which ancestor reincarnated a particular child, (Ibegwu Ki doma wa), the deity that guarded the child before and after birth (Ebọ oji), the activities of the witchcrafts, benevolent and malevolent spirits, etc. Based on the above premise, Illah succinctly explains the Igala cosmic order thus:

In Igala universe, a tripartite system exists, occupied by the living (Aboile), the dead/ancestors (Abo egwu) and the Almighty God (Ojo). The Almighty God occupies the highest point in this hierarchy, followed by ancestors, who occupy intermediary position between God and the living. The living came last in the hierarchy. They constantly minister to the ancestors directly, who carry their offerings, prayers and problems to Almighty God. It is presumed that the Almighty God, too, follows the same communication channel when he wants to address humanity, though; there are other alternatives open to him in his omniscience (9).

In the same vein, Boston writes that, among the Igala, the ancestors are called abegwu. According to him, 'these terms are used for the deceased members of patrilineal kin groups (clan or lineages) who are believed to retain a close interest in the affairs of their descendants and to intervene on occasion for either good or ill according to the kind of relationship that has been maintained between the living and the dead. He reiterates that a person who lives a good life and does not neglect to make regular offerings to his ancestors will be blessed by them so that his affairs and his family life prosper. That a person who incurs the wrath of his ancestors through quarrelling within the family or through neglect of the proper offerings may be visited with sickness or other misfortune by them (16).

CONCEPT OF MASQUERADE IN IGALA

The masquerade phenomenon in Igala cosmology and worldview emanates from the belief in ancestral spirits. On this premise, Sargent writes that, the Igala of central Nigeria have a long tradition of ritual association with the deceased members of the community and the creation of masks and masquerades to represent this spiritual relationship between the living and the

ancestors. He goes further to say that, Igala masks are, on one hand, a euphemistic expression of the cult of the ancestors, and a physical representation of collective or individual ancestral figures. On the other hand, he stressed that, these masquerades reflect the cultural, ethnographic and political reality of the Igala nation state. (17)

Masks and masquerades in Igala world view are symbolic representations of the ancestors defined by a particular community and represented in a physical form. There is a very strong relationship between spirits, masquerades, ancestor cults and historical reconstruction in Igala worldview. In Igala, masquerades are revered and feared because it is believed that masquerades are the ancestral spirits who have come in a different form in order to share some goodwill with their off-springs. Illah believes that, "masquerades in Igala worldview thrive on the myth that a balance must be maintained in the relationship between the living and the dead". (39) Sargent states further that, "the Igala believe in the celebration of life, and this relationship is through the masquerade. Primarily, the masquerade is believed to be a vehicle of expression of ancestors' continued desire to participate in the activities of the living" (38).

The Igala have different types of masquerades which represent various human and spirit manifestations. There are male and female masquerades, there are beautiful/handsome and ugly masquerades, there are kind and violent masquerades, there are entertaining and aggressive masquerades; there are tall and short masquerades; there are rich and poor masquerades; there are permanent and temporal masquerades and, above all, there are sacred and social masquerades.

Some masquerades are as old as Igala and such masquerades are permanent as special occasions are designated for their outing and performances. In most cases, such masquerades have rituals and rites to perform. Such masquerades include: Ekwe the royal masquerade, Egwuafia, Atawa Ekeji, Epe, Ochochono, Ingelekpe, Agbanabo, Ikekekku Ahunna, Jamadeka, Odumado, Ichawula, Obajadaka, Abilifada, Abule, to mention but a few. Each of these masquerades has peculiar functions which, in most cases, are ritualistic. For instance, Sergeant analyzing the functions of Ekwe states that, Ekwe is a symbolic representation of the power, prestige and hereditary authority based upon historical precedent hereditary authority based upon historical precedent established by rulers and vested in the central monarchy and relate these powers to the previous dynasties while ensuring that the monarch does not exceed in his authority. In this way, Ekwe becomes an institutionalized mechanism which limits the potential for excessive power manipulations by the monarchy, and protects vassal, slave, commoner, and clansmen alike. As a related feature of this central masquerade, Ekwe serves to keep the population within socially acceptable bounds, while reminding them of the power and authority of the monarchy. In this regard, Ekwe is the collective spirit of the Igala monarchy and representative of the central leadership in the Igala nation state. Ekwe is the leader of all Igala masquerades.

In Igala there are masquerades which are out simply to entertain the people by singing and dancing. Also, there are masquerades which are sacred and which performances go beyond the entertainment as they are mechanisms for social control, and are effective in the elimination or control of aberrant or unacceptable behaviour. Such masquerades are a representation of religious beliefs and the basic physical characterization of ancestor worship.

Such masquerades demonstrate mysticism, thaumaturgy, wonders and all forms of spectacular activities. One of such masquerades is Epe, which is credited with enormous power with healing abilities. Epe can heal all forms of sickness. Egwu Afia and Atawa Ekeji are known to have the powers to heal, curse and even cause death to evil people. In Igala culture, masquerades wield enormous power. Masquerade phenomenon is sacrosanct in Igala culture and perhaps in some other cultures in Africa. Hence, the secretiveness of masquerade and the arts of masquerading are never divulged to the uninitiated, women and children.

THE ABULE AND ATAWA EKEJI MASQUERADES

Abule are night masquerades which are never seen by anybody but are only heard throughout the night. Abule are masquerades that are found in every part of Igalaland. Like in Ibaji area of Igalaland, Abule appear once a year. This is on the eve of Eka Uwo festival. Eka Uwo is one of the festivals in Ibaji that is celebrated with fanfare. The festival lasts for five days. The festival witnesses a great number of visitors from far and near communities. It also witnesses ritual activities, music, dance and masquerade displays. There are different types of masquerades such as the beautiful ones that dance, the limbless ones like Wonder masquerades that perform thaumaturgy, the aggressive ones that cane, etc. Among these masquerades, Abule are the first one that appears on the eve of the festival. On the eve of the festival, and by nine O'clock in the night, men, women, and children are all out with their music and dance. Each group tries to undo the other with their music and dance. Around twelve mid-nights, women and the uninitiated will be told to leave for their rooms as Abule are being expected. By one in the morning, "whooping" and vibrating sounds are heard. Then, other similar sounds, as if a million dogs are barking, will fill the night. The sounds seem to be produced by a million wooden rulers which are perforated at the end and with a chord tied on the end. If the rulers are swung, they may sound as a million barking dogs. The Yoruba call it the voice of "Oro" while the Igala call it 'Afu' with several other appellations. It is this million sounds that set fears in people's hearts as some women and the uninitiated are said to pass urine on their beds out of fear. Almost at the same time, shrilled voices are heard. The voices of a million ancestral spirits that have come as masquerades. These shrill voices of the ancestral spirits are clear and well projected. The voices can only be likened to one speaking through white-light cellophane. It is the combinations of these ancestral voices with the barking sounds of a million spirits that set fears in women and the uninitiated alike.

Abule, the ancestral spirits have the capacity to monitor the day to day activities of human beings. The Abule are aware of all aberrant activities of the mortal beings. As the ancestral spirits, they frown, abhor and detest such aberrations and out of such abhorrence they expose such unwanton acts as stealing, murder, adultery, fornications, witchcraft, poisoning and hundreds of such aberrations.

The Abule usually organize themselves in groups. Each group has a leader. The leader of each group leads the songs as the groups move from house to house and compound to compound. Three or four such groups can visit a particular compound depending on the weight of offences committed in such compound. Their songs are vulgar as the songs usually

satirize the detested human activities and behaviours. One of such songs goes thus: "Omi le tu ega ma yiomu lu le a lode, abu mi a le ni Ni Kima chola, a bu mi ale Nini Ki ma chola ta, Abu mi a le Nini Kima chola." This Song admonishes the husbands who are often suspicious of their wives. If their wives go to the market, school, waterside to fetch water, bush to fetch firewood, etc, they are suspected by such husbands. Sometimes, some of the songs are physical insults on the physical structure of a woman and sometimes, women's private parts are described, etc.

As a group of Abule gets to a particular compound, they first of all address the husband and then the wife. After that, if the man had committed wicked acts of the Abule will relate all such evil deeds substantiating their claims one after the other. Having finished with the husband, they now turn to the wife. If the wife had committed adultery or if she had ever stolen or attempted to harm the man, etc, the Abule will reveal everything and all these must be substantiated with facts and figures as the case may be. After finishing with the wife, they may move on to the grown up daughters. These activities will continue in this form until 6a.m when all the Abule groups will come together under one leader who will lead the final songs which goes thus: "Ulolu jolu, ulo lu jo lu, abo ikolobia, elo mi tu me, elo mi tu me. Ulo lu ji." This means, all those who have been sleeping all the night should wake up. That the male youths be informed that they are about to leave till next year. In the real sense, no one slept through the night. Women and some non-initiates stayed awake throughout the night not only to listen to what Abule would say about them, but others too. All the information released by the Abule would become sources of gossips for the next three months or more.

Writing on spirit phenomenon in Igala culture, Sargent observes that, there are three distinct types of spirit forms among the Igala. According to him, there are the common "bush spirits" which are neither acoustic nor ancestral, but which are prevalent within each segment of the population. The second type called Abule are not necessarily associated with any central institution, and can be heard, but not seen. They are, however, representatives of deceased members of the community. Boston enunciates this point by writing that:

Abule belong to the class of noise making masquerades who come at night and are, in principle, not seen by members of the community. They are in a sense, Egwu, or ancestor, and speak in a shrill stylized voice... but they are not the ancestors of a particular clan or lineages, as Egwu Afia are... Abule symbolize rather, the collective authority of the dead. (155)

On the other hand, Ukwedeh, discussing the Igala masquerades as social control, states that masquerades are called am am'egwu, which could belong to families, wards, or lineages, the village, or town, communities as a whole, and were ostensibly the property of the chief of the town, the Onu-Ewo, and as a result, were highly influential in early Igala society. He states further that apart from entertainment, masquerades function among the Igala as agents of social and political control. He, therefore, lists the masquerades that function as social control as follows: Ekwe, the Ikelekwu-Afuma, the Abule, the Obajadaka, the Olagenyi at Emewe Abocho, the Ogede of Iyale, and the Egwu Afia. Apart from Abule and Egwu afia, the rest of the masquerades mentioned above publicly flogged erring, or anti-social members of society. He reiterated that, the Egwu-afia, the Ajamalede and the Amuda,

publicly rebuked erring members of the society such as thieves, adulterers, the indolent and the haughty, by disclosing their names, and by causing and warning them. He emphasized that, the Ajamalede, in particular used words that were loaded with fact and meanings to psychologically chastise offenders. In the case of the Abule, their main function was to watch over public property and prevent their misuse. Utilities such as public plantations, ponds, lakes, or community farms were placed in the care of the Abule.

The major issue now is, does the Abule "inferno" have any major effect on the community? In other words, does this form of revelation as released to the community on the individual's aberrations in the society have a strong impact on the Igala?

The answer can easily be found in people's reactions after the Abule night. In the morning after the Abule spirits have left for their spiritual abode, women would be seen in groups as they discuss what happened in the previous night. A lot of gossips are quickly put together and disseminated. Those women who were grossly abused will remain in their rooms weeping. Some other with large hearts will brace themselves as they participate in dancing along with the Ofogoli masquerade which appears almost immediately the Abule departed. It is obvious that, the wicked people, the witches, the thieves, the adulterers, the fornicators, etc. will have their excesses curtailed or completely stopped.

Abule masquerades do not curse the erring members of the society. Abule do not lie neither do they deliberately inflict pains on the members of the society. They simply satirize the society, expose the evil ones and hand down warnings that such aberrations should be stopped hence forth so that the posterity will not emulate such evil attitudes and behaviours. If a particular person should continue with the same behaviour Abule will not hesitate to visit him or her in their next outing.

The second masquerade that falls in the category of the Satirists are Atawa Ekeji masquerades. The name simply means "our second father". Atawa Ekeji masquerades are highly exalted, revered and venerated. Unlike Abule, their activities are spectacular and thaumaturgical. The Atawa Ekeji belong to the top of hierarchy of the Igala masquerades, hence, men below fifty years of age can never participate in their activities.

The Attawa Ekeji are not necessarily night masquerades like Abule, but like Abule, they are faceless. They are never seen physically but are heard by everybody. There is no specific season for their outing, but, there are specific reasons for their appearance. Unlike Abule, their purpose for outing is not to satirize or reveal common aberrant activities, they can only be invited from the land of the spirits in cases of major aberrations that may lead the community into a permanent destruction. In this case, their invitation is to appease the spirits of the land, to curse the erring person and to destroy certain disservices to the land. Also, they come to put in harmony a community in dissonance. Indeed, the Atawa Ekeji come to bring peace to a distraught community. In fact, if an elder commits an abomination, such elder's authority is divest of him immediately. Atawa Ekeji masquerades have absolute authority over the people as they appear to be the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. Their decisions are quintessentially final. They can fine a particular offender a number of goats or an amount of money they deem appropriate for a particular offence.

As masquerades of a great hierarchy and power they leave behind a series of spectacles in the morning. For instance, one would find it very difficult to understand how a very

big mortar would be placed on the branches of a tall and huge silk cotton tree. One would marvel how a white thread would pass across the community without finding where the thread was tied to. It would be unfathomable how a big tree would be uprooted without causing any damage to the roots. And, above all, the knowledge of people, their activities and events are all at their finger-tips as they relate them with such accuracy, veracity and verisimilitude.

With all the spectacular activities that are attached to Atawa Ekeji, whenever there is news of their outing, the community is often in a disarray as the wicked, the witches and warlocks, the thieves, the adulterers, etc will look for where to hide themselves.

CONCLUSION

The Igala society is a very sophisticated one. They are controlled by their norms as well as their worldview. Any Igala who decides to play down on them usually has him/her self to blame. The structure of the Igala society is such that every Igala is his brother's keeper. The Igala society has a good control over her citizens, and can easily and collectively call any person found with outrageous behaviour to order by using every established machinery available to her, including the interventions of the masquerades which social control function has been the subject of this paper.

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