

THE ROLE OF ART, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY IN AFRICAN MASQUERADE PERFORMANCE: A MACRO VIEW OF AKWUJANE MASQUERADE OF IGALA

BACKGROUND

Igala is the eightieth largest ethnic group in Nigeria. They are mostly found in Kogi State (Kogi East). Some pockets of them are in Anambra, Enugu, Delta, Edo and Benue States.

The Igala practise the three religions in Nigeria, namely traditional religion christianity and Islam. Of these three, it is the traditional religion that has very strong influence on the people because it is upon this religion that the Igala can define their existence. Christianity and Islam are foreign religions. The influence of the traditional religion on the people is enormous. As a result of the people's religious piety and reverence, they hold the Almighty God (Ojo ondu wa onu), ancestral spirits (Ibegwu) and deities/gods in high esteem.

In their worldview, the people believe in life, death and life after death. After death, one joins the ancestors in the world beyond where life continues. In this case, the dead who is now an ancestor is imbued with supernatural powers. The power to move at will, visit their living offspring without being noticed, diverting sickness, danger and death from their offspring. In most cases, such ancestors go through a process of reincarnation through such offspring. Sometimes, the ancestor has the choice of coming into the mortal world as masquerade. The dead are represented in the mortal world with some iconic symbols such as staff (Okwute and Ibegwu). The dead are always summoned into the world to commune with the living through the representations mentioned above.

Boston highlights that;

....a man's relationship with his guardian spirit and with the other ancestors expresses the notion that his destiny is not entirely of his own making, but is determined partly by forces beyond his control. In Igala religion, a person's destiny in this world is believed to depend upon a choice in the presence of the creator (ojo) in the spirit world before the person was born... (1977:14)

There is a strong link between the living and the dead through masquerade.

THE IGALA CONCEPTS OF MASQUERADE

The masquerade phenomenon in Igala world view is a very strong spirit idiom which connotes the concept of life after death. This concept emphasizes the continuity of life and the recycling of life which is referred to as reincarnation. The dead can come back into this world again by being born to an offspring or a very close relation, or through masquerade.

The Igala have several masquerades which may be classified according to their locations, behavioural manifestations, structures and forms. There are royal masquerades such as Egwu Atta which manifests in Ekwe the most significant royal masquerade and the leader of all the masquerades in Igala kingdom. There are other general masquerades which belong to the community, others are simply attached to the individual family or lineage. Ekwe is to the Igala masquerades as Attah is to the Igala people.

Discussing the Igala masquerades, Sargent has the following to say:

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. Igala masks are, on one hand, a euphemistic express of the cult of the ancestors, and a physical representation of collective or individual ancestral figures. On the other hand, the masquerades reflect the cultural, ethnographic and political reality of the Igala nation State. (1988:17)

In Igala, the behavioural manifestation of every masquerade is a direct bearing of the life style of the purported ancestral spirit

that comes into the mortal world as a masquerade. There are ugly masquerades, there are beautiful and handsome ones; there are female and there are male masquerades, there are gentle types and there are stubborn types, there are rich types and there are poor types etc. The world of masquerade is an epitome of the world of the ancestors, in fact, the immortal world, and as well as the world of the living, the mortal world.

In Igala, masquerades perform several distinct functions based on their individual authorities in the spirit world. For instance, Sargent observes the following functions among Igala masquerades;

Masquerades are a mechanism of social control, and are effective in the elimination or control of aberrant or unacceptable behaviour. Masquerades can be a source of historical evidence, whether this data is explicit or implicit, and are a reflection of ethnic origin. Masquerade can be a technique for establishing Political legitimacy, and are a mechanism whereby devotion and loyalty are generated within a diverse population. Masquerades are a symbolic representations of national, clan and lineage affiliations, as well as the ancestors of a specific group or grouping, and can also be owned by specific age-sets which cut across descent group relationships. Masquerades are a representation of religious beliefs and the basic physical characterization of ancestor worship. (1988:36).

There are several other functions of masquerades in Igala culture which will constitute a complete research on its own as the focus of this paper is on the place of art, science and technology in "Akwujane" masquerade of Igala.

We have observed in our earlier discussion that masquerade in Igala culture and perhaps in other cultures in Nigeria is a reflection or epitome of the ancestral world. At this point, one may wonder the relevance of art, science and technology in the world of spirit.

The names "wonder", "Akwujane", Egwugbomgbom and "Egwu aboji meji" are all appellations of one masquerade. These names were coined from different views expressed by different people at different occasions and for various reasons. For instance, the name "Wonder" might have been a coinage by a foreign audience observer who, after watching with bewilderment the feat

and spectacle performed by the masquerade, would have exclaimed, "what a wonder, what a wonderful performance". On the other hand, the name "Akwujane" was coined possibly by some other audience who had taken a particular interest on the heap or mass of lifeless cloth in the performing arena in the course of one of the performances. The words, "ekwu" meaning to die and "ane", meaning ground are compounded into "Akwujane" which means literally a "masquerade is a dead object on the ground". In the same vein, the word "Egwugbomgbom" was first used by the late Paul Odi Onalo, a prominent musician in Igala land in the course of his music. "Egwugbomgbom" is an onomatopoeias of this tower-like structure masquerade. Finally, "Egwu aboji meji" simply means a two headed masquerade.

In all probability, the four names are the reflection and validation of the true concept of this masquerade and they are going to feature in our discussions.

The Egwubomgbom masquerade and its like in Igala culture are categorized under myth, mystic and thaumaturgic entity. The phenomenon of thaumaturgy is the key instrument for this particular discussion. According to Illah,

The "Egwugbomgbom", performed by the Igala in the Ibaji area south of Idah is the most peculiar of Igala masquerades of all categories. No other masquerade can rival its size or its aerial performance and display. Even as a ritual-performing masquerade of the Diagnostic pattern, it creates so much awe and entertainment in its boisterous performance, that audience response becomes purely aesthetic. (1983:169).

"Wonder" or Egwugbomgbom masquerade is about eighty feet long and three feet in diameter when in performance. On the other hand, while taking its rest in the performance arena, it symbolically "dies" leaving a mass or heap of cloth on the ground. When coming out to the arena, it is like a corpse laid on a platform and conveyed by one or more persons to the performance arena. When it fully stretches either on the ground or up in the air, it presents a tower-like structure. The wheels are spaced out at about three feet apart and going towards the two heads, they shrink in

diameter until they form cones. While the masquerade is taking its rest these wheel-like structures will move close together in a chain formation. The two coniform heads of the masquerade are attached with tufts and with some tiny bells, which create special jingle sounds while in performance.

STAGES IN PERFORMANCE

As we mentioned earlier, in its outing, the "Akwujane" or "Wonder" masquerade is either carried on a platform like a corpse or in a 4ft x 4ft x 4ft box. It is carried into the performance arena by one or more persons. In the performance arena, the "Egwu aboji meji" will remain mute for about fifteen minutes amidst instrumentation and songs. After two to three volleys of gunshots, it raises one of the heads. Then, dances out of the platform or box. As the music continues, it stretches on the ground to its full length. Then, one of the heads begins to rise until it gets to about thirty to forty feet high. The second head continues with the miraculous rising until it reaches the same height. The two heads could coil in the air like a huge snake. They could fight and perform all sorts of manipulations. As the music goes frenzy, this tower-like structure could be found on the top of a storey building and with the same form of manipulation is found on the ground once more. It can get to its full length on the ground and begin to coil and crawl like a giant snake. At a point, the entire structure seems to collapse leaving a mass or heap of cloth on the ground.

There was an occasion when some doubting Thomases decided to climb and walk on the mass of cloth in order to ascertain. If there were human beings inside. But, to everybody's awe, they could not feel any object in, and no sooner had they stepped down than the masquerade rose to its full length and started the performance. The masquerade can shrink to just six feet in length with both heads performing while hopping about.

Going through the feat as performed by this limbless masquerade, one may wonder what mechanisms could have made the masquerade stand firm on the ground and with the two heads erect in the air without their being blown down by the wind? What

strength can be attributed to the "spirit" behind the masquerade in order to gather and manipulate this mass of cloth and the tower-like structure in the air for so long? What skills enable the "man behind the mask" to climb a storey building? Why is it that in its lifeless state, people had walked on it from one end to the other without marching on any object? What makes this huge spectacle crawl like a snake masquerade roll on the ground like a towering drum? Etc.

The construction of the wheel-like objects gives the masquerade a solid state, not just a mere heap of clothes, but a sort of tunnel that gives it a drum-like-shape which aids it to crawl like a snake and roll like a drum. "Egwugbomgbom" masquerade is an architectural ornament.

The masquerade has the capacity to elongate to its full length and shrink to just six feet. There seems to be a mechanism that enhances this form of mobility. It seems some hollow objects like Indian bamboo are joined up until the masquerade attains the full length and when the joints are removed, it then shrinks to about six feet. The mechanism of elongation and reduction of the "Wonder" masquerade through an effective manipulation of such objects create a bewilderment and a state of awe to the audience. If one may ask again; where are such objects hidden? Such a large number of objects would have created a sort of load which would have caused a serious discomfort to the "man behind the masquerade". Furthermore, such items would have manifested clearly while in performance.

At this point, where do the art, science and technology lie in this mystic ancestral spirit?

Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary defines art, science and technology as follows: art, "practical skill or its application, guided by principles: human skill and agency... application of skill to production of beauty... and works of creative imagination... a skilled profession or trade, craft, or branch of activity; magic or occult knowledge or influence; a method of doing things: a knack: contrivance; address, crunning article: crafty conduct: a wile etc". It also defines science as, "knowledge: knowledge ascertained by observation, and experiment, critically tested, systematised and

brought under general principles:... a skilled craft... train skill..." It defines technology as "the practice of any or all of the applied sciences that have practical value and/or industrial use: technical method(s), in a particular field of industry or art: technical nomenclature: technical means and skill characteristic of a particular civilization, ,group or period."

In each of these definitions, a common denominator is "skill". There is tremendous skill application in the performance of "wonder" masquerade. The body manipulation or movement of this great masquerade in response to the music requires great skill. The fashioning out of the objects which are used for the elongation of the masquerade is an exercise of skill. The process of fixing the objects until the masquerade attains the length of about eighty feet is another demonstration of skill. The construction of the wheel-like-objects which gives the masquerade the tower-like structure is an epitome of skill acquisition. The demonstration of different feats, myth and mystic by the masquerade are skills made manifest. The architectural construction of the masquerade is obviously skilful and the beautifully made cloth that serves as the costume for the masquerade is a show of skill.

The concept of art, science and technology in relation to "Egwuaboji meji" masquerade emanates from the following views: Looking at the entire structure of the performance, it is obvious that it is a work of art. The musical component of the art is inviting and appealing. There are four drums altogether: One long drum and one big round drum are effectively manipulated by a single drummer even while on parade. Two side drums are played by single individuals. There is a big metal gong which is played by another individual. These drums make such wonderful music that people can hardly resist dancing to it irrespective of their conditions and state of minds. The songs are few and are punctuated with recitations and incantations but appealing; all these are work of art.

Constructing and assembling the awesome masquerade which epitomizes beauty is also a work of art. The manipulation of the tower-like structure in line with the rhythm of the instrumental music is an art made manifest.

It is a common truth that whenever the terms, science and technology are used, our mind usually goes to the Western form of science and technology. It should be noted and understood that Africans had their indigenous science and technology before the coming of the Whitman. Indigenous science and technology in Africa are demonstrated in their building of architecture, other forms of constructions and in their medical practices, magic, myth and feats.

The concept of technology (indigenous) is applicable here in the construction of the masquerade. It is difficult to imagine a bunch of cloth which can easily stretch to about eighty feet long and four feet in diameter, rising up and standing erect in the air for a couple of hours without being blown down by wind. All the manipulative devices inherent in the masquerade such as the hollow and short bamboo trees which are joined until the masquerade rises forty feet high, the wheels which are constructed and which form cones at the two ends, and the sewing together of clothing material which at last produces a spectacle are perfect application of African technology.

African sciences in some cases, are an abstract concept, abstract from the point of view of how the system work. Africans can produce several feats which are difficult to explain. "Wonder" masquerade belongs to the category of thaumaturgy. Everything about it is awesome and sublime. According to Illah;

...In this sort of performance, it is difficult separating the ritualistic from the social. While the original intention may be ritualistic, and the function diagnostic, an Egwugbomgbom observance involves the community at large participating in the ritual act of purging the society of witchcraft, evil misfortune or curing the sick. The aerial and acrobatic displays, to the accompaniment of music, dancing and spectating, may give it an air of social celebration. This it is, but it subsists in the diagnostic functions for if, for example, the gun had refused to sound, it would have foreboded evil to the society, which will necessitate urgent remedial measures (1983:176).

We have already indicated a situation where some people had stepped on it and walked its length and breadth without feeling

any object. We have also explained the occasion when in its performance, it manipulates itself on the roof of a building. There was an occasion when the Igala branch of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) decided to carry it along with them during their campaigns to various local government areas. There were about a hundred vehicles in a convoy. The "Wonder" masquerade was crawling and manipulating its way from one vehicle to the other as they moved along on the road. There was a particular group who on the first time of performance, the instrumentalists and the audience sat at the bank of the river Niger playing their musical instruments accompanied with song, incantations and sacrifices, the masquerade suddenly appeared from the middle of the river to everybody's awe and amazement as the cloth, rather, the body remained dry. "Egwugbomgbom" masquerade raises a spectacle which is difficult to discern and such can only be explained as an African science.

The making of the "Wonder" masquerade must have involved considerable research, experimentation, systematised knowledge which was brought under general principles and the end product put into practice as its technical nomenclature has been mastered and the outcome, the "Egwugbomgbom" / "Akwujane" / "Egwuaboji meji" / "Wonder" masquerade.

The construction, manipulation and the structure of "Wonder" masquerade of Igala are associated with creativity, intelligence, craftsmanship, mystic, myth and above all, beauty, all these qualities are products of art, science and technology.

References

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