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Between the Spirit World and the Pentecostal Pulpit: Agulu Masquerade at the Crossroads

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Abstract

In Igbo cosmology, masquerades (mmanwu) are not mere performers in costume – they are the living embodiments of ancestral spirits who have crossed the threshold of death yet refuse to sever their bond with the living. The Agulu people hold this tradition with profound reverence: the masked spirit enforces social norms, dispenses communal justice, transmits oral knowledge through chant and performance, and bridges the chasm between the visible world and the spirit realm. But this sacred institution now stands at a precipice. Two relentless forces – Pentecostal Christianity and the tide of modernization – converge to strip the masquerade of its spiritual legitimacy, reducing centuries of embodied theology to – at best – folkloric entertainment, and at worst, pagan idolatry. The crisis is epistemological: as elders die without initiating successors, the connection between specific masquerades and the particular ancestors they embody dissolves into irretrievable silence. Who is the spirit behind the mask? The question, once answered with unshakable certainty, now echoes unanswered across Agulu. Drawing on ethnographic observation and community testimony, this paper examines the categories, functions, symbolism, and performative rituals of Agulu masquerades against the backdrop of this existential threat. It argues that preservation cannot succeed through nostalgia alone. Instead, the paper recommends an interfaith community dialogue – one that carves out space for mutual respect between Christian doctrine and ancestral veneration – paired with urgent documentation and digital archiving of masquerade lineages, chants, and ceremonial protocols before the last initiated elder takes the knowledge to the grave.

Keywords: Homeland Security Law, Anambra State, Public awareness, Perception, Political influence, Security governance

Introduction

Cultural heritage encompasses diverse traditions and practices that identify individuals and set them apart from those around them. These elements of culture profoundly shape daily life and influence behaviours, beliefs, and social interactions. Among these traditions, masking and masquerading stand out, capturing global attention with their vibrant expressions, particularly those with African origins.

In the Igbo society of Nigeria, the art of masking and masquerading, referred to as *iti mmanwu*, boasts deep-seated historical significance. This captivating practice has evolved through generations, serving multiple purposes: it plays a crucial role in enforcing social norms, maintaining communal order, providing entertainment, fostering spiritual and ancestral connections and immersing participants and audiences alike in a realm where the ordinary meets the sacred. *Iti mmanwu* is not merely a performance; it

is a profound ritual that delivers social commentary, embodies oral narratives, and acts as a vital conduit for transmitting cultural knowledge. Each mask, intricately crafted and rich in symbolism, tells a story, inviting onlookers to engage with the timeless traditions that echo the wisdom and values of the Igbo people. Through these dynamic expressions of heritage, the essence of community and identity is poignantly brought to life.

Before the arrival of colonial influences, particularly from Western powers, masquerades played a crucial role in maintaining social order during gatherings and throughout society, also serving as a means of disciplining those who strayed from societal norms. Ezenweke (2012) notes that “masquerades in many African communities, and specifically within Igbo land, checkmate late-night cooking by women and regulate the behaviour of men who abuse their wives. They fulfil functions akin to the police within a traditional and cultural context. They apprehend wrongdoers, impose fines, and ensure the community remains peaceful and united”. Masquerades often assume essential roles during traditional ceremonies, such as the initiation of young males into adulthood, the rituals associated with honouring the dead, and the observance of cultural cycles, including new moons and the planting and harvesting seasons. Additionally, masquerades serve as instruments of social commentary, offering insights into societal issues, calling out wrongdoing, and promoting communal engagement. They are also critical for preserving and transmitting oral narratives, cultural myths, heroic histories, and cultural knowledge through their performative arts. These practices illustrate a profound connection between communal memory and ancestral veneration, positioning masquerades as conduits for intergenerational storytelling and knowledge transfer.

The masks and masquerades carry symbols that reflect the traditions and culture of their origins. They serve not just for entertainment, social governance, law enforcement, ritual performance, social commentary, and the transmission of cultural knowledge; their insignia, regalia, paraphernalia, and performative arts all embody deeper meanings. As stated by Nnamani et al., (2020), “The dance movements, actions, and styles of masquerades convey both overt and covert messages and meanings. They are not merely a display of physical power and alertness, but an expression of the community’s repertoire of knowledge and experience about operative forces in their environment. The dance movements associated with the different mask types are replete with symbolism and imagery”. They are systematically categorised based on their specific specialisations, with each category exhibiting distinct attributes such as martial prowess, mystical capabilities, youthfulness, and senescence.

Masking and Masquerading in Agulu

Agulu is an autochthonous community that proudly showcases a rich tapestry of history, culture, and traditions nestled within the Anocha Local Government Area of Anambra State. Masquerades in Agulu are communal symbols; they hold immense cultural significance and are perceived as sacred entities within the community. These vibrant figures are believed to embody the spirits of deceased ancestors who emerge from the

spirit world with pearls of wisdom and spiritual mannerisms to interact with their living descendants during funerals, ceremonial rituals, festivals, and other occasions that call for their guidance and acknowledgement. They are seen as a come-back-to-life ancestor and must be held sacrosanct. (Nnabuenyi, in Okoye, 2020). Their sacredness and what they represent are held in high regard among the Agulu people.

In Agulu, the term "masquerade" is used as the English equivalent of the Igbo words *mm̄onwu* or *mmanwu*. There are various interpretations regarding the etymological significance of this concept. Some believe it is derived from two root terms: *Mmuo* (spirit) and *onwu* (death), which translates to *mmuo ndi nwuru anwu* (Spirit of the dead). Others argue that it came from the root words *Mma* (beauty) and *onwu* (death), meaning "Beauty of the dead." This contrasts with *Mmady*, where *Mma* (beauty) and *Ndu* (life) convey "Beauty of life" or, more literally, "Human being." In Agulu, the terms *mm̄onwu* and *mmanwu* are used interchangeably. Regardless of whether one uses *mm̄onwu* or *mmanwu*, both refer to a unique form of artistic performance characterised by characters adorned in masks and elaborate regalia who are generally regarded as the spirits of ancestors. Enemu (2012) stated that "In Agulu, masquerades typically symbolise supernatural beings and ancestors who return to dwell among the living." This belief is rooted in the idea that a true understanding of one's lineage fosters a connection with the ancestors who have shaped one's existence. Onyeneke (1987) revealed that every *mm̄onwu* is typically taken to mean a perceptible spirit of the dead in general without any attempt to identify it with any particular dead individual. This is true with the masquerade tradition in Agulu.

In Agulu, as in many other Igbo communities, masquerading is more than just a festivity; it is a revered tradition steeped in cultural significance and spiritual depth. It is an emblem of identity and transformation, carrying profound meanings that can only be fully appreciated by those who have undergone initiation into the *Mmuo*, the masquerade cult. This sacred knowledge is closely guarded, with clear delineations of participation: women and children are not only discouraged from engaging with masquerade matters but are outright prohibited. Any woman attempting to breach this sacred boundary is viewed as committing a serious transgression, often incurring harsh consequences. During the vibrant performances of the masquerades, women and children observe from a respectful distance, their faces illuminated with admiration and wonder as they witness the intricate display of artistry and cultural expression. In the time before colonial influences and the introduction of Christianity in Agulu, every male was expected to undergo initiation into the masquerade cult, lest he face the stigma and derision that accompanied non-participation. This initiation is a rite of passage, a gruelling test of courage and endurance that signifies the transition to manhood and the assumption of adult responsibilities.

Agulu masquerades are distinguished by two distinct categories: the captivating night masquerades, shrouded in mystery, and the vibrant day masquerades, which feature various classes of performers, each telling unique stories through elaborate costumes and rhythmic movements. Together, these elements create a rich tapestry of cultural heritage

that continues to thrive in the hearts and minds of the Agulu community.

The Night Masquerades

The night masquerades, also known as the ‘invisible’ masquerades, unfold beneath the cover of darkness when the community is shrouded in twilight, and all forms of light are extinguished. These captivating performers include *Ajikwu anyasi*, *Onyekuluya*, and the formidable *Agu Mmuo*, or tiger spirit. The figures emerging from this shadowy realm are not mere entertainers; they are revered as guardians of the community, summoned during reckoning to reveal the transgressions committed within the social fabric.

In their hauntingly mesmerising displays, these enigmatic masqueraders possess the power to identify and judiciously condemn criminals, witches, wizards, and others deemed harmful to the community’s well-being. Their presence serves as both a warning and a judge, often imposing severe penalties on those who have strayed from the path of righteousness, occasionally even culminating in the ultimate punishment of death. According to Enemuo (2012), “these masquerades are believed to embody the spirits of the underworld, sent forth to unmask social offenders while simultaneously celebrating those who exemplify virtuous behaviour”. Their intricate rituals are designed to expose misdeeds and serve as a societal mechanism to curb human excesses, reinforcing the values that bind the community together.



Fig. 1: A typical *Onyekuluya* night Masquerade

Notice the quill-suit-like costume that blends well with the darkness and aids its disappearance into the bush.

In Agulu, it was a rare and fearsome occurrence to hear the jarring and eerie voice of the *Ajikwu*, or *Onyekuluya*, breaking the cover of night, calling out the names of transgressors and laying bare their wrongdoings. The haunting cries of these night masquerades and the sound they produce create an atmosphere charged with trepidation, as they are thought to be ethereal spirits. *Onyekuluya*, for instance, is demoniac, single, wicked, curses, prophesies and creates sound illusions of distance and proximity (Okoye, 2015). They are not accompanied by any music performers; they come in their group, calling one another by a

weird name. The night *Onyekuluya* will be performed, people go to bed early, put out their lights because *Onyekuluie* abhors light. Anyone who puts on light receives some revenge from them. With the shouts of *Ewoo, Ewoo, Okuo, Okuo*, they throw stones and thick clubs of wood at the roof of the building and in the direction of any light as a warning to put out the light of any form.

These masquerades' presence is heavily guarded, as they are not meant to be witnessed by anyone outside of the night or 'invisible' masquerade cult. Entry into this exclusive brotherhood requires a second rigorous initiation process, intended for individuals who have undergone the initial initiation into the masquerade cult, further underscoring the sanctity and mystery surrounding the masquerades in Agulu.

The mystery and the dread of the night masquerades are tied to two things: their time of operation, night, and their ingenuity in the creation of trepidatory, eerie, howling sounds that are weird and fearsome to the uninitiated. As for the latter, Okoye (2020) narrated the three main contraptions that make it possible.

"The first is about three inches long, hollow, cylindrical, reed-like device covered on both ends with polythene material (or a special type of spider web, or bat-wing skin) with a lateral slit around the middle, placed on the mouth. This device is a type of sonovox (*okpili* or *odu achalla* in Igbo) that distorts the voice when spoken or screamed into, giving it a guttural, grating texture supposed to be that of ancestral spirits. It effectively masks individual voices, making the actors virtually unidentified when they speak. When used in unison, it gives the impression of rumbling, grating, and voice-like sounds. The second major device is the bull-roarer (*agu Mmuo*, *agu mmonwu*, *agu mmanwu* or *ode giligili*). This device ranges in length from 15cm to about 40cm, and about three to five inches in width, is plain, flat wood or bamboo that has a rope attached and wound around it in spring-loaded twists and turns that, when released, make the device spin around itself, giving off light, reverberating sounds. It is then swung by the user in varying arcs away from him. The vibration and reverberation of the device as it spins and cuts through the air in arcs give a very deep, rumbling, fearsome sound that appears to "breathe" as it maintains alternating sound frequencies. This has been used in many ancient civilisations for spiritual, ritual, worship, and other purposes. Night masks use the bull-roarer to establish their presence".

Describing further, he stated that:

"The third device is the rattle and the rattle-gourd. This is known as the *ichaka, abia, ekpili* in Igbo. The rattle itself (*ekpili, abia*) is tied around the feet (ankle) of the actuators, while the rattle-gourd (*ichaka, abia*) is held in the hand(s) or tied with an elastic rope to the palm. Measured and rhythmical stomping and stamping of the feet and accompanying shakes and strikes of the rattle-gourds give the impression of heavily clad, earth-shattering swarms of spirits. As many as forty night mask actuators, all "armed" with rattles and rattle-gourds, operating on cue and in unison, definitely make a spine-tingling impression during the inscrutable darkness of night." p.10.

In Agulu, the elements of darkness and the eerie sounds accompanying the night masquerade performance are just as significant as the masquerade itself, if not more so.

This is basically because the performers often don scanty costumes or none. The obscurity and the ominous sounds they produce afford them a degree of cover. In contrast, daytime mask performers use sound primarily for entertainment, while their wooden headgear and other costumes conceal their identities and provide a sense of disguise.

The Day Masquerades

The masquerades performed during the day in Agulu fall into distinct categories: *Nne-mmanwu*, *Akpala mmanwu*, *Agadi-mmanwu*, and *Mmanwu Adamma*. Each of these categories showcases a unique aspect of the culture and belief system of the Agulu people. Unlike the night masquerades, which are only meant to be viewed by those specially initiated into the night masquerade cult, the daytime masquerades welcome spectators. However, women, children, and non-initiates are advised to maintain a respectful distance.

Nne-mmanwu (The big or chief masquerades)

The *Nne-mmanwu* (big masquerades or chief masquerades) are usually energetic, fierce and gigantic, with fierce-looking masks, regalia and paraphernalia that depict strength, fearlessness and warriorhood. Their performances and songs, unlike the others, portray and recount deeds of exploits and strengths. Their performances are accompanied by traditional musical instruments such as wooden drums, metal gongs, bells, and *Oji* (rattle staff), signifying equity.

As Umegbolu (2022) states, “these prominent masquerades play an essential role in the legislative and executive functions within the Agulu community”. Some of the masks' headdresses are carved into wooden animal-like shapes to depict the characteristics the masquerade represents. Some carvings are a combination of fierce-looking human faces and strange-looking animals. Some examples of these masquerades include: *Ololo*, *Agaba*, *Ikote*, *Okwo mma*, *Anuka*, *Mkpamkpa nku*, *Ozoka mkpo*, etc. Some of these masquerades can be quite perilous. *Nne-mmanwu* make appearances during festivals such as the New Yam Festival, the burial ceremonies of esteemed individuals and the veneration of local deities.



Fig. 2: *Ololo Umuowe Agulu*, a typical *Nne-mmanwu* performing in a burial ceremony. **At left:** *Ololo* carrying a framed enlarged photograph of the deceased. **At right:** *Ololo* making an enigmatic dance move. Notice the four horns on the mask (two at the front and two at the back) and a carved leopard standing on top of the horns. This symbolizes double strength, bravery and power. Notice also the wide-open eyes signifying fearlessness.



Fig. 2: *Ololo Umuowe Agulu*, a typical *Nne-mmanwu* performing in a burial ceremony. **At left:** *Ololo* carrying a framed enlarged photograph of the deceased.

At right: *Ololo* making an enigmatic dance move. Notice the four horns on the mask (two at the front and two at the back) and a carved leopard standing on top of the horns. This symbolizes double strength, bravery and power. Notice also the wide-open eyes signifying fearlessness.

Notice the wooden sword representing strength; the elaborateness of the wooden headdress, its detailed carvings, paintings and colourful fabrics all signifying a rich tapestry of ancestral relevance.

Nne-mmanwu are renowned for their performative arts, characterised by their enigmatic dance moves, rhythmic back-and-forth movements, affirmative gestures, disapproving body shakes, cryptic mumblings, and swift chases of onlookers. These elements contribute to the distinctiveness of their performances. In *Agulu*, a typical *Nne-mmanwu* wields either a wooden matchet or an axe, symbolising authority and power. This contrasts with other types of daytime masquerades, such as the *Akpala-mmanwu*, which carries a long cane to flog young initiates as a form of entertainment.

***Akpala-mmanwu* (youth or young masquerades)**

Akpala-mmanwu (youth or young masquerades) is an important category within the *Agulu* masquerade tradition. Its importance is first in its role in the cultural civilisation of the young males. Participation in the masquerade cult begins with participation in *Akpala-mmanwu* (youth masquerading). In *Agulu*, initiation into the masquerade cult is significant in the life of young males. It symbolises the transition from boyhood to manhood. Young initiates learn sacred knowledge, community values, discipline, maturity, key traits of adulthood and the responsibilities of manhood.

Again, *Akpala-mmanwu* function as supervisors of common ethics and social behaviour; they undertake disciplinary functions such as collecting fines from anyone who

violates communal laws. In the case of disputes over economic trees in the community, the *Akpala- mmanwu*, when summoned, would place “*Ọmu mmanwu*” (the masquerade palm tendrils) to bar some individuals from trespassing into the property until the dispute is settled and peace restored. (Onwuzulum 1977, 71). If an uninitiated attempt to remove the “*Ọmu mmanwu*”, such a non- initiate faces disciplinary actions from the masquerade cult.

During vibrant cultural festivals, such as the Iri ji ọfụ (New Yam Festival), the captivating *Akpala mmanwu* performances mesmerize attendees with a rich tapestry of dance, rhythmic staccato stumps, and enchanting *mbem mmanwu* (masquerade chants). These lively spectacles include the spirited pursuits of initiated young men, who engage in tests of endurance and speed through long-distance runs and exhilarating sprints. In Agulu, as in many surrounding communities, the *Akpala mmanwu*, particularly those that focus on the captivating *Mbem*, are accompanied by the soulful melodies of a wooden flute. The flautist plays a pivotal role in these performances; according to cultural belief, the enchanting notes of the flute govern the masquerade's actions. Thus, if any offence is committed by the masquerade, it is the flautist who faces repercussions, underscoring the deep-rooted connection between music and the masquerade's behaviour in this vibrant cultural expression.



Fig. 4: Front view of a typical *Akpala mmanwu* in Agulu



Fig. 5: Back view of a typical *Akpala mmanwu* in Agulu.



Fig. 6: An *Akpala mmanwu* performing a staccato stump dance



Fig.7: An *Akpala mmanwu* with a cane for chasing around young male initiates

Akpala mmanwu performs law enforcement duties; they arrest social offenders and collect fines when the community law is violated. For instance, during disagreements over ownership of a property or economic tree(s), an *Akpala mmanwu* would tie or make a barricade with an *ọmu mmanwu* (the masquerade palm tendrils) on such property, signaling that the property is off-limits. Or under spiritual protection until the ownership of the property is determined.



Fig 8: Akpala mmanwu performing Mbem (masquerade chant). Notice the rapt attention of both the young and old initiates

Trespassing into such an area is a punishable offence for which an Akpala mmanwu will serve as the duty of a law-enforcer. In Agulu, Akpala mmanwu holds a distinct cultural significance rooted in its cultural functions.

Agadi-mmanwu (elderly masquerades)

Agadi-mmanwu holds profound symbolic significance in Agulu, embodying the virtues of old age, wisdom, reverence, and respect for elders. This category of masquerades is recognised for its distinctive regalia and paraphernalia, which often highlight the physical traits and mannerisms typical of elderly individuals. Characteristics such as wrinkles, a hunched back, slow movements, and languid dance steps, along with an old bag containing a snuff box and an animal horn for drinking palm wine, reinforce the portrayal of the elderly.

During festivity and cultural celebrations, the Agadi-mmanwu takes on the role of the elder, contrasting with the Akpala-mmanwu, which playfully pursues young men in tests of agility and endurance, often punishing those caught with a flogging. In such scenarios, young men can seek refuge from the Akpala-mmanwu in the presence of an Agadi-mmanwu, who offers them protection from the relentless chase and floggings. Agadi-mmanwu are also known for profound proverbs, idioms, and humour that captivate audiences while imparting cultural wisdom. They narrate instructive tales and serve as a source of guidance and social commentary within the community. In Agulu, notable examples of Agadi-mmanwu include *Ojimkpọ*, *Ọtụ mkpọ*, *Ọya bụ nka* and others.

Masquerade Chants (Mbem Mmanwu) and Performances as an Oral Narrative and Knowledge Transmission Tool

Mbem mmanwu (masquerade chant) is more than a rhythmic, melodic vocal expression for entertainment; it is a rich tapestry of poetic aesthetics and traditional knowledge that reflects the cultural heritage of the Agulu people. Through the skilful use of parables and literary devices such as proverbs, idioms, and metaphors, these chants artistically recount historical events and impart moral lessons. This enhances their aesthetic appeal and poetic quality and strengthens their effectiveness in knowledge

transfer. The chants can serve various purposes, including praise, satire, self-commendation, warnings, advice, or prophecies. In line with this, Okoye (2015) revealed that “as the chants entertain and please the audience, potent words of advice and chastisement also fall into place and get heeded.”

In Ele (2022), some masquerades use music for their performances and displays. Some musical instruments, compositions and performances allude to the fertile minds of the African forebears and the rich heritage of African traditional musicology. This means wisdom and knowledge derived from Igbo cultural beliefs and cosmology are transmitted, and the culture and traditions are preserved. Esoteric languages are prevalent in masquerade chants. With coded language, information understood only by the initiates is conveyed. This communication typically involves guttural articulations and specific mannerisms intended to exert social control, preserve spiritual mysteries, and foster respect.

The Incursion of Modernism and Christianity into Masquerade Tradition

The rise and evolution of modernism and Christianity have profoundly influenced the masquerade tradition in Agulu, with Christianity having the greater impact. Although the indigenous population shares a common ancestral heritage, they have different beliefs about masking and masquerading. Christianity teaches that each person is destined to die only once, awaiting the great trumpet and judgment, while the practitioners of the ancestral folk religion maintain a contrary belief. This fundamental theological divide has shaken the very foundations of the masquerade tradition, calling into question the authenticity of its spiritual roots and significance. Until this day, the question of which masquerade embodies a specific ancestor remains unanswered, leaving a deep sense of ambiguity.

Moreover, the nature of spiritual beings is incorporeal and intangible, contrasting starkly with the tangible manifestations of masquerades, which don elaborate wooden headdresses, tailored garments, and occasionally, hand gloves and stockings. Such dissonance raises critical questions about the traditional belief that masquerades are revered spirits deserving of the highest respect. As Ele (2022) insightfully observes, “these (Christian and traditional religious practitioners) share some commonalities of space and time, there are attractions and distractions, a call for continuities and an urge for discontinuities in matters of masquerade culture. This dynamic suggests moments when faiths meet in mutual respect and admiration, yet, at times, it devolves into crises and conflicts between Christians and followers of traditional religion”. The resulting discord and the persistent lack of resolution to questions surrounding the concept and practice have led to a decline in the acceptance, respect, relevance, and sacredness of masquerades in Agulu.

While some regard masking and masquerading as an invaluable tradition worth preserving, others contend that it no longer deserves attention. The landscape has shifted; modern institutions encompassing legal, administrative, judicial, and law enforcement

systems have been embraced by modern society. This makes traditional methods like masquerading for conflict resolution increasingly irrelevant. Today, penalties, punishments, and sanctions historically handed down by masquerade institutions have sparked communal disputes that reverberate with modern legal implications. Furthermore, the focus on masquerading practices and rituals often comes at the cost of prioritising modern education and meaningful efforts toward sustainable development, raising vital questions about the value of masquerading traditions in a rapidly changing world.

Conclusion

Beyond its roles in entertainment, maintenance of social order, religious practices, knowledge transmission and oral narratives, there remains a pressing concern regarding the masquerade institution. The tradition has been misappropriated for unnecessary acts of social violence that undermine its promotion and retention. Masked participants exploit the anonymity provided by masquerade costumes, alongside the secrecy and sacredness inherent in the tradition, to perpetrate oppressions, assaults, and violations of human rights, including the indiscriminate flogging of vulnerable individuals such as the elderly, women, and children. These injustices must be addressed swiftly and thoroughly, and the role of the masquerade tradition in contemporary society must be reassessed and reconsidered.

Recommendations

Masquerading is a pivotal instrument and a medium for indigenous symbolism, oral narrative and transmission of knowledge in the culture and traditions of the Agulu people. Considering its important place among the Agulu people, the possibility of loss of such cultural practice, anonymity enabling oppressions, assaults, and indiscriminate flogging of vulnerable groups (elderly, women, children). The following are recommended:

Enhanced Preservation of masking and masquerading (*iti mmanwu*) Through Documentation and Digital Archiving

Due to declines in masking and masquerading as a vital conduit for oral narratives, chants (*mbem mmanwu*), and knowledge transmission, as a result of modernism, community leaders, libraries and scholars should systematically document performances, chants, symbols, and devices (e.g., sonovox, bull-roarers) using audio-visual recordings and digital platforms. This could involve partnering with institutions like departments and art faculties of universities, archives, museums and ministries of art and culture, etc., to create open-access archives, ensuring intergenerational transfer without relying solely on initiatives.

Promote Interfaith and Community Dialogue for Mutual Respect

The library should partner with community leaders to organise a facilitated dialogue between Christian leaders, traditional practitioners, and youth in Agulu to foster a mutual

understanding and belief over masking and masquerading. This could include joint workshops on shared values like social order and moral lessons, reducing crises and encouraging hybrid practices (e.g., non-violent masquerade elements in community events).

Implement Regulations to Prevent Misuse and Human Rights Violations

The masquerade cult and community elders should establish enforceable guidelines, such as banning physical violence during performances and requiring accountability for abuses. Involve modern institutions, such as a local security outfit, for oversight. Instead of physical punishment, night masquerades could retain their authoritative presence but focus on symbolic acts. For instance, their appearances could involve dramatic rituals such as placing "Omu mmanwu" palm tendrils as a spiritual barrier to signify communal disapproval or a call for resolution, without direct violence. Again, The punitive role could evolve into an educational one, where night masquerades will use their platform to teach moral lessons. For instance, Onyekuluya's haunting cries could accompany storytelling sessions about ancestral virtues or social norms, leveraging chants (*mbem mmanwu*) to transmit wisdom through proverbs and metaphors. This aligns with the tradition's knowledge transmission role, turning fear into a learning opportunity for initiates and listeners, while excluding violent enforcement.

Integrate Masquerade Traditions into Education and Sustainable Development

The state ministry of education should include masquerading elements such as masquerade chants (*mbem mmanwu*) into school curricula in Anambra State to teach cultural heritage, ethics, and history. Additionally, the masquerade culture should be adapted for economic benefits, such as eco-tourism during festivals (New Yam Festival), promoting non-exploitative participation to balance cultural relevance with sustainable development goals.

Encourage Further Research to Resolve Ambiguities and Adapt Traditions

The key unresolved question of which masquerade embodies a specific ancestor suggests an expanded scholarly research; this could involve an ethnographic study with initiates to clarify symbolism, enabling adaptations that align with contemporary values.

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