

# **MBEM MASK CHANTS AS POETRY: A BRIEF EXPOSÉ**

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## ***Abstract***

*This paper provides an introduction to the general mask tradition popular and common among the Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria. One of the features of the mmonwu type of masks is the chant; and this study makes a case for it to be viewed as poetry because it has been seen to contain poetic elements as the research proved. Being a hallowed, old, and revered tradition of the Igbo, its study will no doubt yield fruits of a rich, interesting and sublime corpus of poetry.*

## **Introduction**

Many research works have been carried out in the masking traditions of the Igbo of Nigeria but the concentrations of the works have been on the sociopolitical and dramatic aspects of the institution. Little has been done on its ritualistic and religious inclinations; worse still, researches on its poetic compositions have been scanty.

As an aspect of oral tradition, the mask tradition has within its fold, parts and branches that have very rich store houses of proverbial literature, unique poetry and idiomatic expressions which have remained incidentally oral in their nature. Meanwhile, it is worth knowing that the mask tradition in Igboland is a vast institution with many different and yet similar types within the

same huge fold of masks. The differences become clearer and more autonomous in respect of the geographical spreads and hierarchical groupings within and across the Igbo community. They all share the dramatic aspect, but retain and delineate accordingly, the responsibilities or roles of entertainment, law and order, religion, ritual and cultural totems. The different types of masks in the Igbo masking tradition have strict roles while other masks shift from one similar role to another; but they are generally accorded awe and respect.

In this paper, our interest lies mainly on the poetic nature of the utterances and chants of these masks. These vocalizations are called in Igbo, *mbem mmonwu* – mask chants.

### ***Concept and History***

The masking tradition has a long and ancient history; and the needs and demands of religion and ritual amongst the Igbo and masking in general, might grossly account for the mask's hoary pasts and origins. But a specific type of masking, the *mmonwu*, has a more distinct history. The *mmonwu* is vaguely distinct from the *mmuo* and the rest of the individually unique and numerous components of the Igbo mask tradition. *Mmuo* in Igbo is equivalent commonly, to 'spirit', 'ghost', 'spectre', 'apparition', and so on, in English. But when used singularly as *mmuo*, it refers to a certain kind of mask, but in the plural *ndi mmuo* (*mmuo* people), it then refers to any one or more of the English type equivalents listed above. We are much more interested in *mmonwu*, which is probably a shortened derivative from the expression '*mmuo ndi nwuru anwu*' (spirits of the dead) and their chants. The seriousness of the expression and the mystic aura haloing it is what gives the *mmonwu* type of mask its feared and dreaded position in the

masking tradition. This logically lends justification, potency, and sublimity to the aphoristic, cryptic, and versified utterances that characterizes its speech.

According to Nnabuenyi Ugonna, the *mmonwu* concept can be gleaned from these different accounts across Igboland.

- a. A mask with supernatural powers, regarded as a visible spirit in the community and accorded all spiritual respect;
- b. A spirit coming from the underground in a masked form;
- c. A spiritual mask defied, sacrosanct and not to be touched or approached by humans, inhabiting under the ground, and
- d. An age-old form of mask supposed to come to the man's world from the spirit world.

Meanwhile, it is believed that the *mmonwu* tradition started at Ozubulu, a town in Anambra State in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Apart from theories regarding the origin of *mmonwu* as foreign and as having entered the Igbo mainland from Igala, Yoruba or Asaba, other Igbo-centric theories abound. Some people generally believe that *mmonwu* of the '*Nwaezenogwu*' tradition is a cultish invention of the Aro (Arochukwu) elements in Ozubulu, assisted and aided by powerful medicine men from the indigenous population. The third view is a variant from above; it has it that *mmonwu* was formed as a counter fear-inducing measure and institution by non-Aro Igbos against the '*chukwu*' of the Aro. The story has it that the first *mmonwu* appeared in a dream to an Aro man called Okonkwo Ogbuchi. He was instructed to make the vision manifest in a masked form; he got about this and with a handful of powerful medicine men retreated to a secret place and from thence emerged later the first *mmonwu* called Igbokwe, known as the father of all *mmonwu*.

The appearance of the *mmonwu* as a shrouded, covered, and or bedecked entity is to contain above all, its numerous artistic aspects. The covering or costume ranges from raffia material to cloth and even metal. The covering might be done in such a way as to reflect closely the external anatomy or physiognomy of a human being by making the material cling closely to the entity wearing the mask; or it might be grossly out of shape and abstract like the '*Ijele*' or the '*Okpanam Wonder*'. Its speech is drawled, reedy, unearthly, and guttural; and this is made possible by the use of a small reed-like device. The headpiece is carved out of wood to reflect the demeanour and ideology of the particular mask concerned. Some reflect beauty and elegance while others reflect ugliness and brute force. They keep dignified distances and speak in riddles; and many are believed to be potently evil in charms and can cast spells easily.

### ***Mask Chant Poetics***

The major differentiations between poetry and other forms of writing include the presence of a peculiar diction; the type said to be mystic; grandiose and ornamented. These qualities enhance the aesthetics of a work and are found in denser quantities and qualities in poetry. Our conceptions of the peculiar aesthetics present in Igbo mask chants is that of an appreciation of a revered *beauty of awe-inspiring poetics* and diction in the vehicle of the ritualistic and entertaining drama of a unique and dynamic art form – the *mmonwu*. The operational expression is 'beauty of awe-inspiring poetics'. This is where the aesthetics and core of *mbem mmonwu* lie.

R. N. Egudu in Ogbalu and Emenanjo's *Igbo Language and Culture* says this:

The rhetoric of Igbo language has such agents of imagery as proverbs, idioms and riddles....Thus almost invariably, those poems which contain enough of appropriate and integrated proverbs are likely to be aesthetically satisfying than ones lacking in them. (90)

The proverbs, idioms, and other figures of speech which are resplendent in the chants give us the notion of beauty in verse, the beauty of awe-inspiring poetics made possible by a conscious and artistic use of literary devices. The mode of deliverance further beautifies the chants; according to Emeka Nwabueze in the journal *ENYO*, 'The guttural voice produced adds beauty to the narrative of the masquerade and enhances the poetic and mythic effect of the narrative.' (95)

We shall now look at two excerpts of mask chants; both in the Igbo and English languages in order to see some of the literary devices and aesthetic agents without which the chants rendered will be mere pedestrian prose.

***Excerpt 'A' (Igbo)***

Okwuanyionu na-ekwuru ndi di ndu ekwuru ndi nwuru  
anwu

Okwuanyionu bata obodo e delu

Akpa-aka egbe ekwue

Anunu-ebe m na-aracha akpana ya

Mbuba puru ije nne ya na-atu anya ya

Nya biakwaa na oge akara aka e jenu ruo  
Otakagu bata obodo edelu  
Taa aka aputu ga-agbagbu nwamkpi n'Afo  
Kwa taa bu agbaa a naa

***Excerpt 'A' (English)***

Okwuanyionu speaks for the living and the dead  
When Okwuanyionu steps in there is peace and calm  
Dependable hair-trigger gun  
The Perch-Not Tree I lick the droppings  
The Journeyed Bull whose arrival awaits the anxious mother  
It should come for the day has come  
When *Otakagu* walks in there is peace and calm  
Today the He-goat will be choked to death with *aputu* at  
*afor*  
Today is the grand finale!

***Excerpt 'B' (Igbo)***

Mgborogwu gbachiri uzo  
Mkpomkpo  
Muo a na-eke Nwibe Akanma  
Eri ahuru kwaghaa ete  
Eghu ezuru n'uzo a mii ya  
Onye si a o bughi ya  
O buru ya o me gini?

***Excerpt 'B' (English)***

Great-Root-That-Blocks-The-Path  
Stumbling block  
Great-Spirit *Nwibe Akanma*

A rope beheld and an *ete* is dumped  
The goat caught gets tethered  
If one says he is not a culprit  
When he becomes, what happens?

The above excerpts will be briefly discussed to shed light on the context and message of the lines. In 'A', the masquerade is making it known that it expresses itself anywhere and to anyone, regardless of constraints. It also means that it is at the service of all; high or low, dead or living. In lines 3, 4, 5, it praises itself through metaphorical, mystical and occult praise epithets; while the last three lines suggest formidable challenge to any impedance that it (the mask) might encounter in whatever duty it has embarked upon. Through these classified, cryptic utterances, the mask establishes its authority as a master of coded expressions that are poetic in nature. The gesticulations of rendition and images evoked help to make the poetics inherent, to be more vivid.

In excerpt 'B', the masquerade involved is also confrontationally aggressive; perhaps the lines are directed to an apparent or potential opponent. The first three lines praise the mask's prowess and supposed qualities. Further appreciation of the images evoked there would require a more detailed knowledge of Igbo contextual essentialities, ontology, and intimacy with the masquerade cult. The fourth line is exaggeratingly boastful: it (the mask) is the rope that is beheld and the *ete* (a durable high-altitude palm climbing apparatus) is dumped! Naturally, a rope is puny when compared to an *ete*; but the mask is that 'super-rope' that beats the almighty *ete*. In line five, it issues a fair warning: that none challenges it. If one dares, then he/she becomes the unfortunate stray goat caught

that has to be tethered (incapacitated). The last two lines further describe the mask's scoffing and arrogant attitude.

The technical literary devices of ornamentation inherent are deliberately left out as they could be more easily identified; therefore precedence was given to the above explanations as they could be easily misunderstood on contextual grounds.

### ***Conclusion***

Finally, one might argue that the above do not constitute poetry; but that view would be in the light of the elusiveness of ready-made definitions for concepts such as poetry. But if beauty, sublimity, ornamentation, compression, rendition, versification, orature and their likes are objectively considered, then the above chants and others of their ilk belong to the realm of poetry.

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