

# **OLOJA MASQUERADE PERFORMANCE OF IGALA AS THEATRE OF TRANSITION**

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## **Abstract**

The people's Cosmology is sine qua non to their overall lives and endeavours. In other words, the people's world view is the conglomeration or synthesis of their spiritual and secular lives. Every ethnic group has its guiding principles, aspirations, ethos and philosophy. This paper is focused on establishing the efficacy of the people's cosmology through the instrumentality of Oloja Masquerade Performance. The Igala believe in two worlds, the world of the living and the world of the dead. These worlds are complementary. In this vein, the world of the spirits is said to take precedence over the world of the living as it is believed that the world of the spirits guides, guards and conducts the affairs of men in the mortal world. Oloja masquerade performance comes in as the last segment of the rite of passage of a deceased male. In order that the deceased should rest finally with his ancestors the masquerade has to re-enact the life style of the deceased while on earth, and at the end of such re-enactment, the deceased's house, his farming implements and his staff of office are symbolically destroyed as it is believed that a new home has been built for the deceased by his ancestors. This last process of transition of the deceased is the Oloja ritual performance.

## **Introduction**

Among the Igala, and perhaps like other ethnic nationalities in

Africa, death is a devastating phenomenon. The Igala believe on the inevitability of death. They believe that death cannot be stopped but can be postponed if knowledge about the impending death is realized early enough through the consultation of Ifa oracle. It is through the consultation of Ifa oracle that the impending knowledge of when the danger of death looms around a particular person, or persons and even an entire community is made manifest. It is through the consultation of Ifa oracle that such information as; the hanging danger of death, reasons why death should threaten an individual or the community, what appropriate sacrifices or rituals that may be performed in order to avert the danger of death and what else an individual or the community should do in order to avoid a re-occurrence. Consulting Ifa oracle is just one way of trying to avert the calamity of death. Others are through the use charms. Charms can be used to prevent such death as emanating from witchcraft, poison, physical attack by enemy with machet, gun, spear and any other implement, and accident. The other method of trying to avert death in Igala is the use of curative medicine. If a sick person can be diagnosed of his sickness, appropriate Ògwù or medicine is applied on the person. Such curative medicine may be drunk, used in bathing, rubbed or transfused into the blood. The Igala believe in the concept of destiny. It is believed that before one is born, one would have made some choices of being rich or poor, popular or unpopular, strong or weak, good or bad, and even the particular time to die. If a person is destined to die young, there is no preventive measure. If all the above measures to avert death are taken and death still takes the individual, the Igala will simply resign to fate as they believe that it is the time one was destined to die.

The Igala have several categories of death, such as the death of a baby, the death of a youth, the death of a middle aged person, the death of an elder and the death of man or woman. People's responses to these categories of death are not the same. The death of a baby, middle aged and elderly person is not as painful as the death of a youth. The death of an elderly person is most celebrated of all the above categories. This is because, the Igala believe that an elderly person has sufficiently spent his years on earth (he may not be quite fulfilled) and therefore he has not died but gone to meet with the ancestors to rest after all the turbulent years on earth. The death of an elderly person is simply seen as a rite of passage and, indeed, a transition. In order to bury the elderly person sufficiently enough, a series of rituals and dances are performed and one of such rituals is the Oloja masquerade performance for the deceased old man.

### **The Igala And Their Cosmic Order**

The Igala occupy Kogi East of Kogi State, parts of Edo, Enugu, Delta, Benue and Anambra States. According to Boston, the Igala have been exposed to a variety of cultural influences while the development of the people's culture reflects the history of a long period of contact with other peoples including the Yoruba, Igbo, Edo, Jukun, Nupe, Epira and Idoma. Among the external links, he continues, is the connection with Yoruba which is the oldest and most significant. A close affinity between the Igala and Yoruba can be traced in language, political and social institutions (200)

The Igala tradition and culture are tied to the influence of the supernatural powers, the ancestral spirits, the deities/gods and other related spirits. The people's lives are dominated and

motivated by fear, the fear of the unknown, perhaps the fear of the metaphysical world, the fear of the spirit and the spirit essence and such fears are quintessentially rooted in the people's existence. The fear of the unknown leads to deep-rooted reverence, religious piety and deep sense of protection from the gods, the spirits, the ancestors and above all, the Almighty God. The gods and the ancestral spirits are either iconically represented with clay or wooden sculpture in form of ?b? (deity), Okwute (ancestral staff), egwu (masquerade). Masquerades are believed to be ancestral spirits who have returned to the mortal world in order to entertain, pass judgement, guide, guard, conduct the people in order to transform the mortal world, and above all, to perform rituals.

### **The Cosmic Order**

The Igala believe that one's life from birth to death passes through a cycle and a state of transformation. According to Miachi;

In Igala world view, circumstances and beliefs about birth, life through adulthood and about death are interrelated. In other words, the Igala conceptualize three basic spheres of life, after birth, up to adulthood and life after death. They believe that three categories of people are involved: the child at its pre-and postnatal life, as an adult or elder, and his life as an ancestor. There is a considerable measure of interrelationship and interaction that is central to the existence of the living and which is dominated by the overwhelming power and authority of the dead. Thus, the people believe that the power and authority of the individual increase from the childhood through masquerades (51)

In the same vein, Boston is of the view 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. He enunciates this view by stating that in Igala religion, the person's destiny in this world is believed to depend upon a choice made in the presence of the creator (Ojo) in the spirit world before the person was born... (58)

Illah however accentuates that, in Igala Cosmology, the ancestors have maintained a threatening presence as a result, a system of worship exists through which the symbiotic relationship between the living and the dead is maintained by the continual propitiation of the ancestors with sacrifices offerings and prayers. In this context, every moment of life within the cosmology is of potential celebration; on the farm, on the road, before eating, while going to bed... It is a celebration of ritual interdependence between the ancestors and the living offsprings. It is through this system of worship, celebration and performance that the living solicits the presence of the ancestor to regulate the social ethos and reduce the communication gap between the two worlds... (21-22)

Among the Igala, it is believed that whichever way one does and whatever achievements, success or failure one encounters on earth is ordered, in fact, predestined. It is believed that destiny like the lines on the palms can never be washed away. This simply means that before one is born, one would have taken an oath with the Almighty God on how one would like to exist of earth.

Among the spirits, the Almighty God (Ojo) is at the apex of the supernatural powers, following closely to Ojo is the Abegwu (the ancestral spirits). The ancestral spirits play a very prominent role in the life of an Igalaman. They have the capacity to relate

with the Ojo, plead on behalf of their offsprings, Waive off problems, sickness and death, usher in goodwill, peace and group prosperity, and above all, bring children to their offsprings through reincarnation. The ancestral spirits can reincarnate as babies or they can come back as masquerades. For a deceased Igalaman to assume a proper position as an ancestor, he must have died as an adult, and after his death he would have been given a befitting burial. There are three stages of burial ceremonies. The first one is putting the deceased into the grave (Egwu omi omi eji). The second stage is ubi eche, that means the ceremony immediately the deceased is buried. According to Illah;

During an Ubi, there is the celebration of the eventual arrival of the departed spirit among his ancestral brethren who now accompany him back to partake in the celebration. The main event during an Ubi therefore, apart from an all-night masquerade performance in Ogba competition is the symbolic carrying of a coffin. This is meant to show the eventual successful rehabilitation of the departed member of the family or clan (17)

The final ceremony and the third stage of the ceremony is the Akwu eche or the last shedding of tears for the deceased. It is during the Akwu eche burial ceremony that Oloja masquerade comes out to perform as a fare-well to the deceased.

### **Masquerade Phenomenon**

Masquerade phenomenon in Igala is as old as Igala. The Igala hold masquerade in high esteem. The masquerade phenomenon is one of the most sacred and secret in Igala culture.

Among the Igala, women, children and the uninitiated males cannot behold the knowledge of the arts and science used in putting the masquerade together or to conjure it from the land of the spirits. The African concept of masquerade is not the same as the western definition of masquerade. The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language (Encyclopedic Edition) defines masquerade as; "A social party composed of persons masked and costumed; also, the costumes that disguises, worn on such an occasion. (2) A false show of disguise (3) Formerly, a form of dramatic representation." In Africa, and particularly among the Igala, masquerades are the ancestral spirits that have come back to the world in order to perform several roles such as music and dance, conscientization, sensitization, ritual displays, and above all, to bring in spiritual messages from the immortal world to the mundane world. This fact is reflected vividly by Miachi in his view of masquerade phenomenon in Igala culture;

... there is a constant interaction and active movement between the worlds of the living through which the dead keep surveillance over the activities, and look after the welfare of the living. In the interaction, the dead are encountered with physically and are consulted directly through the masquerade. The power and the authority of the dead are the masquerades as well (91).

In Igala, the of masquerade art is sacrosanct irrespective of the category the masquerade belongs. The Igala masquerades can be categorized under mystic, mythical and thaumaturgic entities with different functions and behavioural manifestations. In this view Illah writes that;

Among the Igala, and perhaps with other related ethnic groups in Africa, masquerade thrives on the myth that a balance must be maintained in the relationship between the living and the dead. The Igala believe in the celebration of life, and this relationship is found in the masquerades. Primarily, masquerade is believed to be a vehicle of expression of the ancestors as they continue with the desire to participate in the activities of the living (1983: 49)

In Igala, some masquerades have spiritual, political, and social functions. While the sacred masquerades perform rituals, the social masquerades entertain the people with dances, drama and other forms of comic relieve. While some masquerades are meek, beautiful and entertaining, other, are aggressive, stubborn and ugly. Among the Igala, masquerades perform a number of social functions, and establish a symbolic reflection of the social formation. Sargent is of the view that;

- " Masquerades are a mechanism for social control, and are effective in the elimination or control of aberrant or unacceptable behavior
- " Masquerades can be a source of historical evidence and are mechanism of social identification and a reflection of ethnic origins.
- " Masquerade can be technique for establishing political legitimacy, and are a mechanism whereby devotion and loyalty are generated within a diverse population.
- " Masquerades are a culturally significant institution which defines relationships of the individual or clan to state, lineage and family.

- " Masquerades are symbolic representations, as well as the ancestors of a 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)

To the Igala, perhaps like the Yoruba, Bini, Igbo, Idoma, Itsekiri, Efik, Ebira, Ijaw, Urhobo, Ibibio, Birom, Nupe, to mention but few ethnic groups, masquerade is the ancestral spirit who has generated into the mortal world to share its goodwill with the offsprings.

### **Oloja Masquerade Performance Of Igala**

Oloja masquerade falls under two categories in our classification of Igala masquerades. Oloja belongs to the categories of the mystic and mythical as well as entertainer. These classifications shall be made manifest as we discuss Oloja's type of performance. Oloja wears a wooden head gear. The body is adorned with traditional hand-woven material known as achi, and on the top of the achi is Iko, raffia palm leaves made into stripes. On top of the Iko are several colours of stripes of cloth. Oloja is an ugly masquerade the head gear is crocodile-like with a protruding mouth. He appears fearsome as he wears a fierce, look, yet, his activities are humble and entertaining.

In Igala, there are relevant events that call for the outing of masquerades. Such events may range from political activities, rite of passage as initiation ceremony, burial ceremony, celebration of lives, ritual activities to festivals. Oloja masquerade does not feature in any other activities except the final burial ceremony of a deceased male adult known as Eche akwu. Eche akwu or final

burial ceremony of a deceased male adult comes once in a year and the ceremony lasts for five days. Eche akwu could be organized for a deceased individual or it could be organized for a large number of the deceased. Akwu eche could attract some other masquerades like Ochonwu and Ofogoli. These masquerades do not perform rituals, but their presence are felt as they move about canning anybody they meet on their way except Onu efewo (King of the community). The masquerade that performs ritual before the Oloja's outing is Egwu afia. Oloja masquerade comes out only on the last day of the Eche akwu to perform the last ritual for the deceased. According to Drewel;

Ritual performance as category of thought configured as a rigid, stereotypic, conventional, uniform, predictable, invariant, structurally static and repetitive and it provides an ideal model in terms of which to understand the culture and custom of the people (1989: 51).

It is a statement of fact that we cannot go through any day without a series of ritual performances. There are religious rituals, the rituals of every day life, the rituals of life roles, the rituals of each profession, the ritual of politics and business and the judicial system.

According to Schechner;

... one definition of performance may be ritualized behavior conditioned/permeated by play. Rituals are a way people remember. Rituals are memories in actions. Rituals also help people... deal with difficult transitions, ambivalent relationships, hierarchies

and desires that trouble, exceed, or violate the norms of daily lives... Rituals that transform people permanently are called "rites of passage" (2006: 45).

Ritual performances are re-enactment of the people's spiritual and social lives. In their spiritual lives, people re-enact the actions of their ancestors, these are effectively represented by the masquerade performance. The Oloja ritual performance is simply to transform the deceased into the ancestor hood.

In consonance with the Igala cosmology, there is life after death. The dead are not dead but simply a transition from one world to another world, but this time, to an immortal world. One's comfort in the immortal world is dependent upon one's deeds in the mortal world while one was still alive and how good enough the living is able to perform all the rituals and ceremonies on behalf of the deceased. If all the rituals and ceremonies are performed haphazardly on behalf of the deceased, he/she may have a problem of settling down properly with the ancestors, hence, the deceased will be hibernating in the mortal world until, perhaps the appropriate rituals are performed. It is believed that the wicked people will never go unpunished in the spirit world. Part of such punishment is that the deceased will not be accepted by the ancestors. Discussing the death phenomenon in Igala culture, Illah observes as follows:

Death is therefore a graduation of man into the next world of ancestor... for an old man who has died of natural courses, the transitional process is quicker. After hovering around for some time, and depending on whether he has had a full burial in his clan, he goes to join the ancestors and to wait

the second burial ceremony, (Ubi) (1983: 16)

The two burial ceremonies with their attendant rituals are significant as the first burial, (Egwu eji omiomi) is committing the body into the mother earth so that the soul can find its way to the world of ancestors. The second ceremony which is Ubi is to allow the deceased's soul to have its normal place among the ancestors. In this vein, Illah reiterates:

The second burial ceremony (Ubi) is of particular importance because it determines whether the spirits eventually joins the ancestors to play the role of intermediary (arbiter) between the living and the Almighty God ... During the Ubi, there is the celebration of the eventful arrival of the departed spirit among his ancestral brethren who now accompany him back to partake in the celebration... (1983: 17)

It is this final ceremony for the deceased that the Oloja masquerade usually comes out to perform rituals. The Ubi or Akwu funeral ceremony usually lasts for five days. It is on this fifth and final day that Oloja emerges from the ancestral world to lead the deceased home.

Oloja as an ancestral spirit has the efficacy and spiritual prowess in knowing how every individual lived his/her life in the mortal world. His outing in the occasion of burial ceremony is to perform a burial rite of the deceased which is to re-enact how the deceased lived his life while on earth and at the end of such re-enactment, the deceased can now join the league of the ancestors.

### **The Performance**

The occasion for the Oloja performance is Ubi or Akwu eche. Akwu eche means shedding tears while Ubi eche means performance behind the deceased's back. This is the day that the deceased is given the last honour through the instrumentation, dance and shedding of tears. By 10.am, elders, youth, children, men and women will be seated at the community play ground (uchiya). It is usually at the circular formation as the performance takes place at arena stage. Elderly men who are in charge of the function, take the front seats along with the instrumentalists who are also among the elders. Women, young men and children are made to stand behind the elders. Women and children normally create an outlet for themselves so that they can easily flee as Oloja emerges from his abode.

There are seven drums which are arranged according to their sizes. Among the musical instruments are wooden gongs, metal gongs, rattles and flute. The instrumentalists are all elders. When the stage is set, the lead instrumentalists, who is the flutist blasts the first note by calling the masquerade, Oloja seven times and the subsequent note is louder than the former. At the end of the seventh note, other instrumentalists join. Elders then begin to get up one after the other to execute their last dance for the deceased. Each elder does not spend more than five minutes in the arena. The essence of the dance is to bid fare-well to the deceased.

After the last elder has danced, the instrumentalists stop the music. Then, the flute will blow a full note calling Oloja seven times. At the seventh time, there will be commotion as women and children flee from the arena. The language of the flute is clear as it continues to call out the name Oloja along with all its appellations. The full appearance of Oloja causes a further stir as

women and children extend their distance from the arena. The appearance of Oloja at the arena brings every activity to frenzy. The instrumentalists quickly change their musical notes so as to create an efficient rhythm for Oloja. What the audience is going to watch for the next one and a half hours is a well choreographed dance-drama. The theme of this performance is the re-enactment and synchronization of the life style of the deceased while in the mortal world. This embraces his profession, his style of walking, his comportment, his deeds and actions, and these would suggest if the deceased can rest perfectly at the bosoms of the ancestors or not.

First of all, the Oloja masquerade through mimickery, movements, gesticulations and body manipulation demonstrates the deceased's appearance. Next, the profession of the deceased is demonstrated through mime. If the deceased was a farmer, the masquerade would demonstrate the land clearing the burning of the farm, the cultivation of the farm, the cutting of the grass, the tending to the crops, the harvest, and the storage of such crop. Whichever profession the deceased belonged would be demonstrated accordingly. Thirdly, the deceased's relationships with others are demonstrated. After this, the deceased's habit, whether he used to consume excessive alcohol and getting drunk often, whether he was womanizing. If he used to beat his wife up, if he was a quarrelsome person, a wicked person, a miserly, a smoker, all these are demonstrated in a dance-drama.

After all forms of demonstrations, and to sum up the burial rites, the great Oloja masquerade walks straight to the deceased's house, if the house is built of thatched roof, a tiny portion of the substance used for the thatch is detached, and then, he walks back majestically to the nearby bush or river and throws it away. If the building is a corrugated roofing sheet, the masquerade simply

mimes the detaching of the roofing substance from the building. Having thrown away the roofing substance, the great masquerade goes back to the house, collects any of the farming implements, brings it to the performance arena and destroys it. Finally, the masquerade walks back to the house, collects the deceased's staff of office or Okega (the personal god), brings it to the performance arena, comes to the front of the instrumentalists takes three dance steps, then, mimes the collecting of a snuff box from his bag, takes a quantity of snuff into his nostril three times, hits the back of his head three times, then, executes three dance segments. At the end of the dance, all other activities stop except the sound of the flute which continues to call Oloja with all the appellations attached to the great masquerade. The masquerade is then escorted back to his sacred abode as the old men are left wailing for the deceased whose life span has been wrapped by Oloja masquerade.

### **Implication of the Performance To The Igala Cosmology**

It is true that Christianity, Islam and Western form of government has dealt a decisive blow on African culture. It is also true that there are some ethnic nationalities in Africa who have in the course of their adherence to the Western and Arab civilization and religion have deemed their cultures fetish, primitive and sinful. And, it is true that the Igala remain one of the ethnic nationalities in Africa who believe that the life of an Igala man is dependant on their culture and that whatever they acquired as a result of Western and Arab civilizations are secondary to the Igala culture. The Igala knowledge of nature, supernatural powers and their essence is enormous and can never be discarded. Their knowledge of nature lead to their prowess in charms and the knowledge of supernatural's like ancestral spirits, deities and other spirits establish



their relationships with these powers.

The Igala believe that the Oloja ritual performance for the deceased marks the beginning of the deceased's new life in the ancestral world. If the deceased had been good while on earth as Oloja masquerade would have demonstrated, it is believed that the deceased has joined the league of the ancestors. But if Oloja masquerade had demonstrated the wicked side of the deceased, it is an indication that the deceased may find it difficult to settle down with his ancestors as a result, the deceased is believed to continue to hover or may be roving between the worlds of the dead and the living. If the deceased was good on earth, he will become a benign ancestor as a result, the living will continue to solicit for his intervention with the other spirits and to appease him for good health, protection, bumper harvest and fertility on the part of their wives.

### **Conclusion**

The issue of second burial or activities after the deceased has been buried is critically observed in the world over irrespective of form and type of civilization, religion and culture. The Europeans, the Indians, the Chinese, several cultures in Africa and Americas are heavily involved. It must be noted that after the death of Jesus Christ, the Jewish culture demanded that on the third day, the body must be rubbed with a particular oil. The Moslems have the fortieth day prayers for the reposing of the soul of the deceased. In Igala, after the burial of the deceased, there are a series of rituals that must be observed on the seventh day, fourteenth day and until the final ceremony of Eche akwu. All the rites that follow the burial of the deceased from the mortal world to the world of the ancestors and each of the activities goes with music and dance

and in some cases drama presentation as with the case of Oloja masquerade performance.

The Igala cosmology stipulates that when a child is born, it is ushered into the world with music, dance and drama, and with the same music, dance and drama, the deceased is ushered into the land of the ancestors.

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