

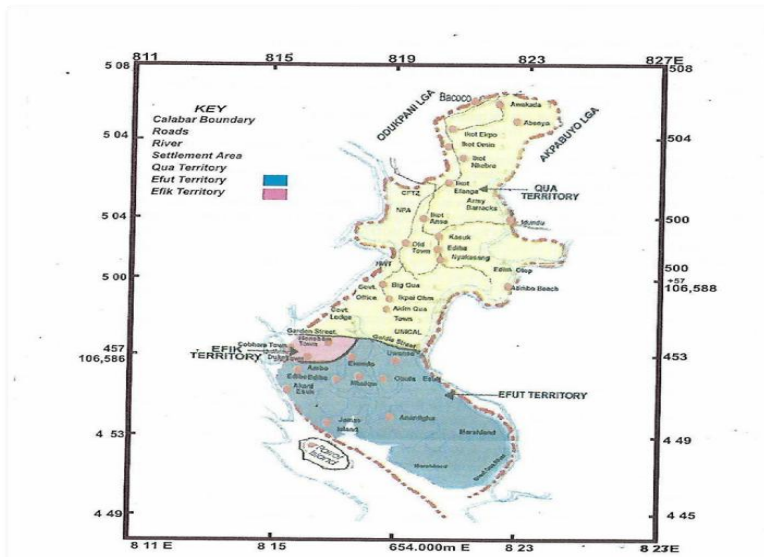
**Angbo-Akata: The Social Dimensions of a Night Masquerade****Edet Essien and Kadimo Oqua**Department Theatre and Carnival Studies  
University of Calabar, Nigeria**Abstract**

Man in his quest for total freedom and liberty seems to harbour resentments for attempts and efforts to bring him and his communities under and in control. This disposition often exhibited by man makes it imperative, especially in governance, for the evolution of certain measures that can curb or contain man's excesses and regulate his activities within the communities and the environments as a whole. African and Nigerian traditional societies can boast of a myriad of institutions designed with this thrust. These organizations operate from different angles and levels and approach deviant behaviours, incidents and occurrences from various perspectives but with the cardinal aim of discouraging wrong-doings and sometimes administering punishment to serve as deterrent. This work focuses on Angbo-Akata in its social dimensions, which serves among others, the purpose of restraining citizens from engaging in activities that are at variance with the communities' and society's accepted norms and values.

**Key Words:** Agbo-Akata, Night Masquerade, Social Dimensions**Introduction**

Traditional institutions performed various social and political functions in Nigerian communities prior to colonialism and the entrance of Western democracy. Today, these functions are predominantly performed by the secular government. But traditional practices still find fertile grounds in both rural and urban dwellers who, even though exposed to the realities of new religions and western civilization, still hold tenaciously to those aspects of culture that serve their inner identities. One can find ostensibly 'Christian' individuals in the cities whose use of

traditional tattoos, talisman, incantations, etc has not diminished. Although individuals may employ traditional practices and belief systems in their personal lives, it is in events like festivals and coronations that these robust traditions are often exhibited. Masquerade performances represent one such corporate context for the enactment of traditional beliefs and oral cultural patterns. This article concerns itself with the social dimensions of Angbo-Akata masquerade, performed among the ethnic groups in Calabar.



**Plate 1:** Calabar Map showing Qua, Efut and Efik Territories (Credit: Edet Ekpo et. al)

### Angbo-Akata

Angbo-Akata is a masquerade performed by the Qua, Efut and Efik lingual groups in Calabar – the Capital of Cross River State, Nigeria (plate 1). As part of a sacred cult, the hallmark of Akata (as it is popularly called) lies in the entertainment it provides and

the secret detective characteristics it possesses. When performed in the afternoon and while touring the communities, it exchanges pleasantries with prominent individuals. The voice is disguised to avoid the masker's recognition. Intermittently, it raises songs that captivate its hearers. It also engages in arithmetic exercises (predominantly counting of numbers). This aspect often amuses its non-initiate audience because of the seemingly illogical format. Akata's number-counting could take this trend: one, two, nine, thirty-nine, forty, five, four, etc – the distorted numerical arrangements being part of its mystery and fun.

Another exciting but feared aspect of Akata is its secret service report. It is exciting when secret escapades of members of the community are brought to the fore and lampooned. However, people still nurse fears because their own dealings could equally become a subject matter. In the course of lampooning, some members of the communities are actually named and their evil acts disclosed. Sometimes, however, the identities of the individuals concerned are not explicitly disclosed. But Akata has a way of describing the fellow(s) or giving other social pointers and indicators that, unmistakably, lead to the identity of the personality in question. Acts often tackled include illicit love affairs (fornication and adultery), theft, drunkenness, diabolism, etc. Before presenting such issues, Akata pretends to be consulting an oracle – to give the impression that whatsoever it says is at the instance of the gods.

Akata has a 'mother' masquerade, Eka-Akata, a magnificent soloist, presented in day time and in full view of everybody. Its musical accompaniment is very inviting and attracts many, both old and young, who often accompany it about. The dance steps involve simple side movements and strutting – reminiscent of a peacock. Akata is believed to have been imported from the Ejagham speaking peoples (Talbot 1912, Onor 1992). One popular song tends to support this opinion:

*"Ekpri Akata oto Ekoi* - This small Akata comes from Ekoi

*Eyam-ba-mba o oto Ekoi edi - Eyamba also comes from Ekoi”*



**Plate 2:** Eka Akata in Performance

Akata is highly averse to illumination. In the course of its display (especially in the rural areas), it beckons on people to put lit lanterns out. In an urban area like Calabar, forerunners have the task of putting out such lights. This phobia informs the presentation of Akata in times of the year when the moon has hidden itself from the earth. In an interview with Chief Ukpanyang Otu, the village head of Obubit Isong, Okurikang-Okoyong in Odukpani Local Government Area of Cross River State, he disclosed that this aversion on the part of Akata is as a result of its desire to hide its identity (Personal Interview). To further conceal its identity, the masker wears an object that distorts the nose, which is responsible for Akata’s changed voice.

At any performance, Angbo makes three outings. The first is a prelude that informs about its appearances while the other two outings are for actual performances. On its first outing, initiates assemble in the Osam Mgbe (Ekpe Lodge) in the late evening, drumming and singing. They gather in the lodge because every Angbo member (or intending member) must first be an Mgbe or

Ekpe initiate. Sounds of drumming invite other initiates to the lodge, who enter it in the cover of darkness. At the appointed hour, usually midnight, the group then leaves the lodge and tours the community, stopping intermittently at important spots to tell the populace when the Angbo will 'arrive' from the forest. This announcement signals the imposition of a curfew on non-initiates on the stipulated dates.



**Plate 3:** Osam Mgbe (or Ekpe Lodge) at Akim, Qua Town, Calabar. (Credit: Kadimo Oqua)

The second day marks the arrival of Angbo-Akata. No one sees how it comes but, prior to midnight, everyone puts out their lights in compliance with Akata's curfew. It is the duty of some cult members on surveillance to ensure that there is strict compliance. When the surveillance report becomes favourable, Angbo emerges from the Osam Mgbe (considered its resting place after the long journey from the forest) to make its rounds in the community.

### **Angbo's Rounds**

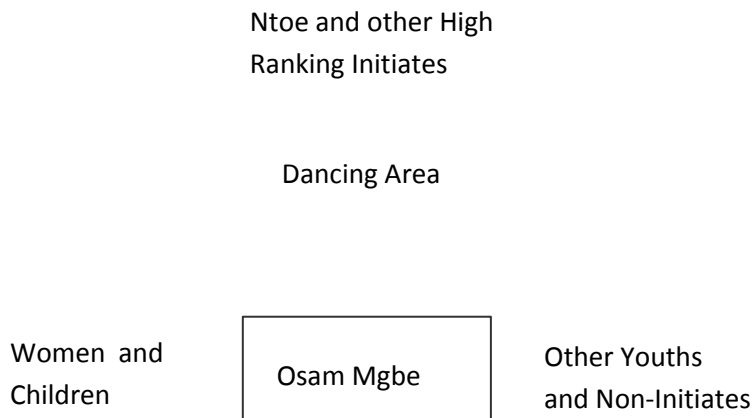
As the masquerade steps out of the Mgbe lodge, sonorous singing and drumming is heard by the awoken community.

Rattles on its ankle shake intermittently to signify the masquerade's movements. Among Angbo's attendants are new initiates who form the surveillance team, and whose duty it is to ensure that motorists put out their lights. The team is responsible for producing the simulated sounds of loud whirlwind and the giant frog. The whirlwind indicates that Angbo is treading a particular path, while the frog sound (normally produced beside a nearby house) is intended to instil fear.

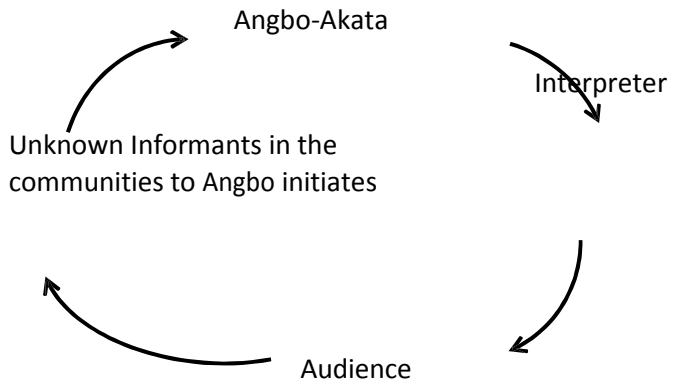
In line with Ejagham culture, the first point of call of any masquerade is the Palace, where Angbo speaks through an interpreter, and informs the Ntoe (King) that the trip to the land was made in company of the wife, Ikana, who also sends greetings. Angbo then makes its rounds through nooks and crannies of the community divulging information and exposing repulsive deeds of citizens. Angbo is an instrument of morality and discipline in the society. It performs this role by revealing misdeeds of members of the society – male and female. When it visits erring members, it tells them to the face, albeit jokingly, what their ills are and the need for them to change for the better.

### **At the Town Square**

On the third and final day, people gather at the Osam Mgbe at about 9.00 or 10.00 pm. The sitting arrangement puts the women and children about two meters away to the left of the Osam Mgbe. Other youths and non-initiates sit at the same distance, to the right. The central position is usually reserved for the Ntoe and other high-ranking Mgbe members, leaving a large performance space in the middle (Fig.1).



**Fig. 1:** The Sitting Arrangement for Angbo's Performance



**Fig. 2.** Angbo's Communication Circle



Songs (and sometimes dances) from women and children precede the session. As the crowd courteously sits, Angbo lights the congregation with hilarious talks. For the benefit of those who may not have heard, the masquerade then repeats the information it passed out the previous night's tour, interspersed with mild and hilarious jests of high-ranking members of the community, even when they have not erred. This heightens the night's fun. Angbo's attendants do the drumming and singing, while the crowd echoes. It is the duty of the interpreter (Okun Obo) to make Angbo's proclamations known to the audience. Sometimes, due to the disguised voice, even the Okun Obo may not properly comprehend what Angbo has said and thus give wrong interpretations. If and when this happens, the Angbo fervently disagrees and ensures that the proper information is passed on. This scenario also provides another reason for general laughter. In effect, Angbo's overall communication pattern is cyclic (Fig..2).

Close to midnight, Angbo informs the audience about its departure to the forest. It is customary for Angbo-Akata to leave the impression that it lives on top of a wild cotton tree, from where it spies events in the community (Ekpo 2005). The audience dismisses as Angbo advises people to be of good behaviour until its next return. Since it is commonplace to sing/dance to the mockery of individuals indicted by the Angbo, the prospect of being sufficiently satirised in song could dissuade inhabitants from evil acts. Such mockery is still common and its effect can last for years (sometimes for generations), especially in the rural communities where Angbo's pronouncements remain highly valued.

### **A Social Context for Angbo-Akata**

Anwana (2004) asserts that one of mankind's lasting problems is governance. Attempts to bring people and communities into control are often met with certain acts of resentment, disobedience and disorderliness – unconnected with man's preference for freedom and liberty. It is this innate dissenting spirit that necessitated the evolution of institutions that regulate the activities of individuals within communities. In its social dimensions, Angbo-Akata serves the

purpose of restraining people from engaging in activities that are at variance with the society's accepted norms and values. Akata makes secret investigations into the activities of individuals within the society. Its satirical inclination exudes social auras that serve to curtail deviant attitudes and make citizens governable. Angbo's satires often sink deep into social marrows, and can be damaging especially in a rural setting, where everyone knows everyone else. Such lampooning often leaves indelible psychological marks that can stigmatize and confine people/families to subtle forms of isolation. An institution like marriage may then be contracted with strains, as members of the lampooned family may be subtly disdained.

Akata does not dwell on the destabilization of society. Its ultimate aim is stabilization, social cohesion and progress. The masquerade serves as the community's motivational force. Angbo-Akata is believed to possess the third eye and, as such, sees beyond the normal perception of humans. Apart from this, the Angbo is believed to have sojourned and experienced the decorum that exists in other communities. If it then pronounces a particular act inimical and calls for redress, the people are moved to action in order to weed-off social anomaly. For example, a cotton tree once fell across the only access road in Idundu in Calabar. The town's inhabitants cast blind eyes on it even though the fallen tree greatly hindered social and economic activities. It took the lampooning of Akata to make the society 'see' the situation as negative. The youths were jerked into action and the tree was removed. This episode was put into song by the Calabar Choral Party in a tract dedicated to Angbo-Akata.

Another example can be cited from an episode in Ekang in Ikom, where the king's brother died and his spirit or ghost was said to be harassing the people in the nights. There were several reported encounters by women going to fetch water from the stream. People believed that the King's brother was part of a wizards' coven. No one could proffer solutions to the problem. Angbo-Ataka was invited and, with permission, the King's brother's body was exhumed. It was discovered that the top half of the body remained un-decayed and fresh, as it had been in life. Akata saved the community from the

ghost haunts by performing necessary rituals and cremating the body.

According to Ndidem (Dr.) Thomas Ika Ika Oqua III, Grand Patriarch of the Qua Nation and Paramount Ruler, Calabar Municipality, Angbo-Akata announces very significant events in the different communities. Deaths and coronation of Kings are often heralded by the Angbo (Personal Interview). He also recalls (as a young man) that Angbo was once banned from performing, by the colonialist. This ban was not heeded. The colonial police laid ambush on Angbo's procession, but found no masquerade. The initiates were however arrested and prosecuted. In court, the defendants insisted that the Angbo is the one to be punished because it was the masquerade that contravened the law. Since Angbo is believed to be a spirit and, therefore, could not be 'found', the initiates were discharged and acquitted. According to the Ndidem, Angbo performed again a fortnight afterwards and lampooned the colonial masters in a song considered to be one of its best:

Obio-obio nye ntang - Tomorrow I go to court

Ese-ese nje ntang-e - Two days ago, I went to court

Ye se njem jen Mokarara - White men, what have I done to you

[Chorus]: Mokarara – o - ooh (twice) - White men –o –o oh

Ye se nyem jen Mokarara - What have I done to you

In the song, the Angbo's 'nationalist' and mediatory role in the society cannot be missed. The masquerade mocked the colonial judiciary processes, which were often great infringements on the basic rights of the locals. In today's Calabar, the role of Angbo-Akata has diminished considerably. This is due predominantly to the fact that its role has been overwritten by organs of the so-called western democratic model of governance. And, of course, the practice of this model has not been without its debilitating failures in Africa generally. Government now makes the laws and controls

information dissemination and other activities in all parts of the 'state'. And, though the postcolonial 'state' is unable to effectively police and govern itself, traditional institutions like Akata – that could made a difference – have been sterilised and socio-culturally reduced. In the local communities, however, Akata still performs and lampoons. But, who cares in a changing society where morals and governance have lost their cultic flavour to compelling global forces. And, the forces of individuation, micro-capitalism and Christianity have also helped to make Akata a 'fetish' and 'heathen' practice of a small segment of today's Calabar population.

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