

NAMES AS VERBAL CODES OF IGBO MASQUERADES.

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Abstract

To the Igbo, names are quite revelatory of lives experiences by parents who give names to their children as verbal codes of their individual and collective memory. When a mother loses her child during childbirth and this becomes a recurrent decimal, the last surviving child is given the name, *Onwughalu*, meaning, may death spare this child. When a child is born to a wealthy family, her name reflects their season of plenty. It would seem that Igbo names may provide insights into the Igbo philosophy of life. In the same way, the Igbo also have names for their various masquerades which this paper refers to as a system of verbal coding. By decoding such names, one discovers that they provide easy access to mask identities, associated mask types, costumes and performance strategies. Relying on both oral and written evidence, the paper examines how names of masquerades provide easy access to Igbo mask typology in their classification, inventory of costumes and how mask theater provides a useful context for aligning mask performance strategies to deferring mask identities and even audience responses to mask displays. The paper concluded that names provide vital clues as verbal codes to Igbo masquerade identities, mask types, costumes

and performance strategies in the context of mask theater at the village square. Paper had decoded that which had been coded in the context of Igbo masking.

Keywords: Igbo names, mask identities, costumes and performance strategies.

Igbo culture places a lot of emphasis on names given to newly born children. The primary reason is to commemorate important events either surrounding the birth of a child or even to thank the gods for their favours. According to Nathaniel and Akung (2022) “People’s Experiences lend credence to their mind, imagination and being (pp. 5). For example, names are experience-driven. Names given to children make references to different aspects of Igbo life as if in retention of a historical memory. For example, a woman who had experienced a lot of child mortality during childbirth gave rise to a name that helps the family to seek divine favour for a surviving child. It is given the name, *Onwughalu*, which translates as, “may this child be spared.” A wealthy family decided to project their wealth into the name that they gave to their newly born child. The name is *Obinuju*, which translates as “Has arrived in the season of plenty.” Some families have children with other names such as, “Chi nualun ogu,” meaning “may my spirit guardian fight for me.” Another bears the name, *Maduiké*, meaning that a human being is a powerful creature with all the achievement possibilities to it. Another answers, “Akubuiro” which is that wealth is a source of enmity, even jealousy. Another answers “Akunne” which is that his wealth is a heritage from the mother. There are several other names that touch on different departments on Igbo life whether their reference is to life, death, sorrow, the future, the past, misfortunes, achievements, ill luck etc. It shows that these names are verbal codes that reveal critical aspects of Igbo life.

Just as Igbo names reference to Igbo cultural values, so do names of masquerades reveal something of their types, status, behavior, their costumes, their character, performance strategies and even influence, including gender etc. This is to say that names of Igbo masquerades are verbal and visual codes by which to identify, name, and if possible classify. In this sense, names of masquerades may provide evidence for any discussions on Igbo masquerades and society.

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RESEARCH

Beauty and the Beast:

There is a binary division in the classification of Igbo masquerades. Beauty is conceptually used to describe those masquerades that celebrate the ideal of feminine beauty. They are known and called *Agbogho Mmuo*, meaning maiden spirits. The Igbo have from time in memorial used their masking culture to portray something of feminine beauty as perceive through the maiden spirit name, their facial structure, costumes and performance strategies. These are elegant masquerades dressed in tight appliqué costumes that reveal something of their body figure. The appliqué costumes are conceived as body painting known as Uli which is the beauty culture of Igbo maidens before they are given out in marriage. They have small white faces with delicate facial decorations and wear a wooden helmet mask representing a dramatic rendering of a maiden's hair coiffure. With the advent of modernization, these wooden headdresses have been replaced with appliqué headdresses. In this outfit, they show off the beauty attributes of a beautiful maiden awaiting marriage as a nubile. Even when they perform in the village square, they dance in intricate dance steps that reecho the intricate decorations of their masked headdresses (Aniakor 1982). What we are leading to is that the maiden's name, *Agbogho mmuo*, is a portrayal in artistic terms of the Igbo ideals of feminine beauty.

On the opposite side of the binary division is the young men's masquerade known as *Mgbedike*, meaning time of the brave (Boston 1960) or a metaphor of female bravery in wrestling, hunting and even war. Boston (1960) says that this masquerade is a visual code for youthful exuberance and virility. This is because as Achebe (1958) had rightly observed in an interview that Igbo men are quite adventurous. They rather become professional farmers and hunters, and who may also engage in distant trade in contrast to the women who stay in the family compounds contemplating life. It is this ability to dare, to confront forces inimical to one's well being or even earth being that marks out this tendency to celebrate bravery as an Igbo cosmic ideal. We see this in masker's costume outfit consisting of a loosely worn dress and which is embellished with clanging bells or seed rattles that punctuates the dance movements. The masker wears a towering helmet mask consisting of multiple tier-levels of potent symbols such as those of the leopard and other forest denizens. These arranged in an open work mask headdress. The face reveals a gaping mouth displaying a set of spiky teeth. The eyes are hollowed out while the overall face may be painted white or even in a res pigment. Both mask headdress and costumes

are meant to unsettle the audience and instil fear in them. The masker also carries a threatening knife in the right hand as a gesture of violence for which it is famous. There is also a medicinal/ritual belt worn by the masquerade behind which is tied a robe which an escort holds in order to restrain it in moments when the masquerade becomes too aggressive and threatens imminent danger on the perceiving audience. When it performs in the village square or public space, he indulges in bold and aggressive spaces of the dance combine with staccato movements from one part of the audience to the other. Members of the audience retreat in different direction as a way of negotiating the masker's threatening violence. Of this masquerade, the Igbo say that there is strength in the hero, *Ike di n'odogwu*. There are other variations of the *Odogwu* masquerade such as the one with the name *Atataka*, often elaborated as *Akata isi ebue*, meaning that to talk about the masquerade raises goose bumps because of fear that the memory it arouses in people. This masquerade wears a tight robed costume painted in black and white stripes and reveals the wearer's youthful figure. His headdress is composed of a collection of ghost skulls which are tight together. There is a robe hanging from the face which the masker pulls forward from time to time in order to see clearly. Accompanying music is sharp and evokes something of the masker's valor. There is a robe round the waist which is held by an escort to restrain his perpetual disposition to violence. Occasionally, that robe is left by the escort so that the masquerade can display its violence aspects by chasing the audience in different directions. They retreat only to re-converge to watch that which repels and fascinates them as if in this context, the ugly is beautiful. What repels also attracts. We therefore see in these two examples that names of Igbo masquerades are indeed visual codes that reveal a lot of two categories of Igbo masquerades, often referred to as beauty and the beast (Blier 1974).

There are other categories of Igbo masquerades whose names tell us a lot about their identities and the cultural values that place them in the Igbo cultural context. There are groups of masquerades that perform other functions of social parody. One of them is known as *Atu mma*, sometimes described as *Onye kulu fa*, which translates as "Who talks about them" as if to suggest that it is not the masquerade even though it is. This masquerade has a carved bird with a long beak as its helmet headdress and wears a loosely structured costume in varied colors. Around the waist is a ritual/medicinal waist band for personal protection against enemy medicinal threats. This masquerade visits village markets to entertain

people. Quite often surrounded by an audience. It dances as it parodies various peoples as target. In doing this, it reveals something about people who it says do not allow people to sleep well at night because they are thieves. It also addresses broken homes and marriages and uses figures of speech to describe people involved in this. By association, members of the audience living in the same community with the villains easily figure out who the masquerade is describing. Through this process of social narrative the masquerade acts like a town crier and exposes evil by ridiculing it.

There is another category of Igbo masquerades that perform in the night as a group and known as ... When they perform in the daytime in the *Uzo iyi* festival at *Umuoji*, they are concealed inside a pyramidal structure covered with palm leaves. From here, they sing about village life and its social contradictions, the ways of evil people and those others that keep village people on their toes. However, when they perform in the night, their identity is lost with darkness. However, they sing in a group moving from one part of the village to the other and exposing the ways of bad people. If they passed in front of a man's compound entrance, they would greet him and wish him well but also begin to mock him by saying that they hoped everyone was asleep except those who had turned the night into their day. By this narrative process, evil doers in the community are publicly shamed as a means of restraining the hands of evil doers. Something of this dialogical encounter between the masquerade and a titled man is of interest. It begins. "Ozo Akubeze (title is wealth), I hope all is well with you and your family. We messengers of the spirit world cannot pass by and ignore a man of high status like you. Everyone is asleep including those whose two eyes are open even though it is night. We hope you too are sleeping well. We greet you. Only a man knows how he sleeps at night, whether he is well covered by the sleeping mat or he is restless because he is dreaming other dreams. What a man knows, knows him. We greet you." Elders in the village easily read this narrative device as an exposure of a man of evil because one cannot learn to use his left hand late in life. As Igbo would say, putting a man to shame before the community is even more dangerous than killing him. It is in this way, that some Igbo masquerades are used as agents of social control.

There is the elderly and titled masquerades known as... This mere masquerade features in a communal masking pageant in *Umuoji* in Idemili north Local Government Area. The festival is known as *Uzo Iyi* which translates as the path way of the stream. The festival is a tribute to the

ancestors described by Davidson (1969) as venerated because through them that the land was created and man was taught how to cultivate the land. Rains are important to farmers because they metaphorically fertilize the land. Which is why festivals in Igbo land serves as a means of attracting divine favors so that the land is fertile for agricultural activities. This is why the festival is described as the path of the stream through which rains fall and enrich the soil so that its cultivation will yield bounties of agricultural harvest. On the day of the mask theater accompanied the Uzo Iyi festival, the village square is alive with people and masking displays. The elderly masquerade described above has a leading role. This is to excite the audience as he enters and dances towards the podium from which he oversees the mask theater that he presides over. Of interest is his physical appearance which draws laughter and provides a lot of humor for the audience. His face is a wooden helmet mask with distorted eye forms, a nose displaying the after effect of small pox and a gaping mouth full of white teeth defined by his red lips. He is supposed to be suffering from the swelling disease. This is why he has a protruding belly and shoulder. He openly displays his large genitalia which he is fond of holding with his hands as he dances. This draws a lot of laughter. The abnormal shown in the deformities of the human body is an important theme in Igbo masking.

Nor do we forget the monumental masquerade known as *Ijele*, the most majestic of Igbo masquerades because it is the epitome of Igbo ideal of what a great masquerade is and represents. This is why the *Ijele* is metaphorically described as the great elephant, the great spirit and the exemplar of beauty (Aniakor 1978). In these terms, *Ijele* is conceived as a towering pyramidal structure which may be described as the crown of the gods. On the mask headdress is an appliqué openwork representation composed of different activities. Their symbols are birds, animals, a variety of miniature masquerades, trees and other forms of surface ornamentation. At the base of the pyramid is a giant python, the daughter of the river goddess, Idemili, bonding the earth and the firmament. Below the giant



Fig.1. The Ijele masquerade in performance.

headdress are different appliqué panels with floral decorations. Carrying this mighty headdress is the masker conceal within. The *Ijele* dance consists of slow majestic steps as the masker dances in circles of the dance before leaping into motion as the audience raises an ovation. When he completes the dance in the arena, it soon exits. The beauty of *Ijele* lies in its monumental size and its complex headdress which houses various symbols that touch on different departments of Igbo life. The *Ijele* is thus Igbo cosmos in motion. It can be said of the *Ijele* that the eyes that behold *Ijele* have seen the ultimate spectacle.

Igbo culture writes Ottenberg (1959) is receptive to change. From their villages, the Igbo have migrated to the urban centers in search of new opportunities as traders, carpenters, builders and journeymen. This was under the impact of urbanization. Having settled well in the urban centers, they began to export to the villages many aspects of urban life. As a result of this, Igbo masking began to reflect the material culture of the urban centers and its secular values that have begun to impact the Igbo rural environments, especially its masking culture. One example is that Igbo

maiden spirits have now been transformed into Igbo city girls which now dance to the disco music with fast-paced rhythms of the dance. This new city girl maiden masquerade has a pinkish face that is carved realistically. She wears a complex hair coiffure made in braids over which is tied and eye catching silky head gear. She dresses in the costume of a city girl and walks with pride that is a little snobbish in its bearing. But when she dances as during the *Mmanwu* festival in Enugu, the whole audience stood up on their toes when she ended in abrupt flourish of her dance. She was greeted with a very loud ovation. Half of the audience followed her out of the stadium in appreciation only to return later. Wherever she displays her quick-paced disco dance steps, she is appreciated as an exemplar for what urbanization can do to the village and its affairs in transforming human values. This masquerade type has become an agent of change by which urban and rural realities have come to intermingle.

Conclusion:

Names have been and continue to be an important aspect of Igbo life. Through them, important events are recorded which may pertain to wealth, death, sorrows, the present and the past, all within the cycle of life. They serve as verbal codes that memorialize important events in human life. In the same way, names of masquerades provide evidence for understanding the relationship between the living and the death as they impact human values and life. We discussed selected Igbo masquerades as visual codes of Igbo life, and how their names help us to identify them, their types, costumes and other mask paraphernalia, including performance strategies. They hint at the ideals of bravery using mask types such as the brave masquerade known as *Mgbedike* to celebrate the Igbo concept heroism or the ideals of feminine beauty. They extend beyond this to include masquerades that entertain and poke fun at social misdeeds or the ways of evil people that disrupt the rhythms of communal life. There are also the examples of night masquerades that expose evil doers through the use of narrative allusions that bring shame to them.

The study also shows that names of Igbo masquerades have been subject to social change as impacted by rural/urban migration and the secular values that have begun to transform Igbo masking culture. The masquerade such as *Adamma* is an exemplar of Igbo receptivity to change. In all we see that names of masquerades like other Igbo names are critical to our understanding of Igbo masking culture, its typology, costumes, mask

characters and performance strategies. It goes to show that researchers ought to adopt different frames of study so that Igbo masking can yield new insights into Igbo life and its traditional and changing values. For as Igbo would say, only a people's firewood can cook for them, including that which may be brought in from the urban centers. For ultimately, Igbo masking as described by a diviner is like going to the land of the spirits, *Oje na mmuo*, while the spirits may also return to the land of the living so that everywhere is filled with music, aesthetic heat and laughter (*Egwu na amu*).

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