





## **Political Ideals and Public Space in Pre-Literate Igbo Society: A Study of the Political Implications of Masquerade Enactment as Socialization Process among the Nri-Igbo**

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### **ABSTRACT**

It is strange to associate politics with masquerade enactments among the Nri Igbo of Nigeria. However, this represents a cultural value of a people and we leave it at that. I am interested in looking at this peculiar phenomenon for a number of reasons. The first is that perhaps it might enable us to understand the mind of the people with regard to the values they hold concerning politics. In what ways is this similar, or different from that of the present dispensation in African? The other reason is that it might go to put on hold the common assumption that women are secluded from masquerade performances and so from politics. The two concepts are hardly concomitant and consequently unable to be reconciled. And yet, one seems to act as an idiom, or metaphor, for the other.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Concerning the seclusion of women from masquerade enactments among the Nri Igbo the issue is hardly debatable as I have tried to discuss in a recent paper on the subject. In that particular study I had argued that this assumption need not be the case since, in any case, as Ann Oakley has maintained, societies are structured by a social dichotomy along gender lines, the Nri-Igbo society not excluded. In other words, by this structuring, there are evident spheres of influence and occupation between the genders. I stated likewise that when we come to what Turner has referred to social drama, women engage mainly in indoor performances as opposed to that of the males which was mainly outdoor and by implication public. Women's performances, by being of the nature of indoor performances, in many ways go to rob the women of their right to public space.

To characterize this public space, we assume that it constitutes the basis for one to acquire public personality. As a phenomenon this is most

### ***Political Ideals and Public Space in Pre-Literate Igbo Society***

commonly expressed in politics. When politicians aspire to be where they want to be in society through formal training in the science of politics, they become objects of focus in society. Similarly, when children train in school to obtain a certificate of excellence, there is an outing at graduation which brings them into focus in society as relevant members of society. This outing ceremony becomes a metaphor for the politician's outing into the public space on becoming a political personality.

We have referred to school as a concept, or learning as a means of achieving this end. It could be formal or informal learning. Among the Nri-Igbo schooling per se, is unknown; informal training, however is common for inculcating into in individual members of society the social ethics of society.

While in the western school system the learning process operates within the classroom environment, in rural Nri-Igbo society it took place in the open space. Hence, one is a fixed structure and the other a physical environment. Such a setting for learning in the African context is what has been referred to by Butt-Thompson as "bush schools (140)." Again, learning in western school system is by reading and writing and cold logic; in the African context it is by oral enactments by means of songs and dances. In content, western schools emphasize the study of specific subjects through logical experimentations, in rural Nri-Igbo setting knowledge is holistic and obtained through intuition. Thus, while western education is academic in orientation in the arts, the end result is towards acquiring a professional qualification or a trade. Among the Nri-Igbo the ultimate end of participating in musical or dance performances is simply, as Enekwe would say, "to acquit oneself creditably." The other reason, which has to do with title taking, is towards taking the *ozo* title considered, and in some ways comparable to what is considered the highest degree in western educational system. Thus, in the West a social school is created for instruction in the arts and sciences for professional skills; in the African setting leaning is organized to instruct members of society in group ways. So that, among the Nri-Igbo, one way among several others whereby members of society are inducted into group ways is through initiation rites and masquerade enactment which is quite antipodal to western methods.

The above assertion requires further explanations. The thrust of all learning, formal and informal, we have noted, is towards greater social relevance. All school systems, western and African, aim towards this end.

#### ***Nri-Igbo masquerade tradition:***

I have stated earlier on that masquerade enactments are generally thought to be the exclusive preserve of males. However, assuming this to be the case, the point is that the males are seen to be the preservers and perpetuators of the lineage, women being often married away into other lineages and into other cultures. There is this belief that a woman's place in her husband's home is their still uncertain until she had borne him a male child. It is this child that is inducted into group ways through initiation into the masquerade

***Ogonna Anagudo-Agu***

cult. Once initiated, the child is well on the path to becoming an accepted member of the society. Female children are looked up as those to be married away sooner or later to begin another cycle of life as their mother.

Enekwe agrees on this seclusion of women from masquerade enactments (67). Onwuejeogwu holds a similar view; both scholars go further to maintain that women are admitted into the masquerade cult only at old age, perhaps after menopause, when this discrimination against women from participating in masquerade performances is over. Otherwise, seclusion of women is in so far as it relates to keeping the secrets of the lineage group, which masquerading aids in keeping, remains the central concern of this way of thinking. Onwuejeogwu makes the most important observation that the art of masquerading is a critical stage in the a process of title taking, and this, by implication, is a learning process too, the successful completion of which prepares one to take on public roles for articulating the ideals in Igbo politics in pre-literate days.

What Onwuejeogwu, an anthologist, and Enekwe, a scholar of theatre arts, have to say regarding this study is critical to our understanding of the subject at hand? Enekwe maintains that ritual is not antipodal or exclusive to theatre as many scholars have tended to argue (20); hence, there is a mutual transformability of ritual and theatre (21).

There seems to be a connecting link in the assertions of both scholars. On his own part, Onwuejeogwu, in his renown book, *Nri Kingdom and Hegemony*, connects masquerade enactments with politics in Nri tradition. The connecting link is that ritual is at the bottom of the respective positions of these two scholars. In the case of Enekwe, it is ritual versus theatre; in the case of Onwuejeogwu it is politics versus ritual authority of Nri kings which I will go to address presently.

***Politics among the Nri-Igbo:***

By the way, what is the nature of this politics among a rural agricultural world like the Nri-Igbo? First of all, I am of the view that it is nothing similar to the concept of politics as it is practiced in the modern dispensation which is purely western derivation. This is because both theatre and politic among the Nri-Igbo are mediated by the ritual concept. Nevertheless there are areas of coincidence in the two concepts. This areas of convergences has to do with th concept of representation in politics and visibility within the public space through another essential political ideal, the power of persuasion and mobilization of the populace through rhetoric.

Rhetoric is not a formal subject of learning among the Nri-Igbo but it is acquired informally through socialization in masquerade enactments with the potential of placing one well on thee path of leadership. This is to say that it a political value. It is well known, too, that the Igbo are a republican people by virtue of the a cephalous nature of their society, and that, as a result of this, democratic ideals formed a part of the social organization of the people. Among the Nri Igbo, however, there developed a marvelous system of priest

### *Political Ideals and Public Space in Pre-Literate Igbo Society*

kings with ritual powers. This might incline one to assume that the people were ruled by autocratic means, but autocracy had no place in the psychology of leadership among the Nri-Igbo. This is because, as the Nri-Igbo would say, “the people belong to the *eze* “priest king,” as much as the *eze* belongs to the people. Implicit in this statement is that no king rules by autocracy, or he is deposed. A king ruled in accordance to the tradition and heritage of the group, particularly in protecting its sacred values. A story is told of a king who broke kola nut with his teeth and was deposed.

#### *The Nri Political Structure:*

It is now generally agreed, as Enekwe has put it, that “the Igbo political system is characterized by egalitarianism and decentralization of authority and power. However, it was Onwuejeeogwu who in his recent investigation, pointed out that there existed an Igbo hegemony in about 948 A.D. by “ritualizing the political system and domestic economy;” and that “the King wielded tremendous power, not only in Nri, but over a vast area in Igboland (44).” On another political level, the king ritualized “the concept of peace, harmony and truth; and enacted “the ceremonies of the *ozo* titled elite.

In this connection, it has to be said that the term *eze*, which is conferred on all *ozo* titled men, is critical to the power and authority of the *ozo* title holders only in so far as their priestly functions is concerned. Hence, *eze* here does not connote leader; rather it denotes one with ritual authority quite different from the “presidential” powers of the modern dispensation. And by ritual authority we mean intermediary between the gods and the people. No doubt, this trafficking with the gods has political undertones.

Nowhere is this so well articulated as in Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* and we find it quite useful in illustrating the nature of power politics among the Nri-Igbo. It has been assumed that Chinua Achebe wrote about Ogidi; however, Ogidi is still to be seen as lying within the Nri-Igbo society by virtue of the cultural influence of the sacred town of Nri, believed to be the holy city of the group. As the literary scholar had noted, it is in the region of Anambra culture zone where Nri influence pervaded, and where *ozo* title-taking proliferated.

Be that as it may, the politics of the gods in *Arrow of God* rested on two very eminent personalities of Umuaro, Ezeulu and Ezeidemili, both of them representatives of particular masquerade cults with conflicting ideologies.

The scenarios involving them represent for us the nature of the politics of the Nri-Igbo, which was usually politics of the gods. In other words, it is the politics of a society that had not shed completely the superstitions of the day, being politics influenced by the gods and oracles which Europe had long discarded centuries before the adventurers came to the hinterland of Africa. It is on this basis that we can now see the politics in the novel as being on the public level of conflict, represented by the conflict between Ezeulu and Ezeidemili. It is a dynastic feud reflected in the gods, Ulu and Idemmili,

**Ogonna Anagudo-Agu**

Ulu being a god of circumstance created by the people to provide them security against invading war-groups.

***Masquerade tradition and Politics among the Nri-Igbo:***

We have so far characterized the nature of politics in this society. Let us take a look at the relationship between politics and masquerade cult of tradition. This can best be seen in terms of the learning process which masquerade traditions provide.

The idea of learning, it has to be said, it at the interface between masquerading as an art and the notion of politics. This is to say that in masquerade art there is learning of the sort that is capable of transforming an individual into a social and public personality by the standards of the Nri-Igbo society.

Let us take a look at the structure, content and institutional set up of the masquerade performance. First there is the preparation and the execution of the performance. In the preparation, and just before the masquerade delves out in the public square for a performance, materials are bought for costumes and props; structures and designs made, the mask-head, symbol of the social group, start off. Sculptors and woodworkers provide their skills; carvings and sculptural works and costumes are attended to in characteristic Igbo stylization and symbolism. All of these efforts involves consultations and commissioning. The mask-head in particular is commissioned from a specialist carver, likewise the large wooden drums and gongs –and assembled.

As all these are going on, the rehearsals start. The performers, in particular the protagonists who are to don the mask-heads, are taught to sing and chant performance songs and invocation chants and incantations. The performance being oral, emphasis is on voice production and modulation, projection and articulation, all of which are put to rhythm. Then, of course, comes the dance movements which are made to fall to rhythm, together with the histrionics of the art.

All this represent a process of learning no matter how informal. Of immediate concern too, is the subject of learning.

The subject of learning constitute the content of the songs which often comprise poetic utterances of the myths and legends of the land, comparable to Ezeulu's enactment of the coming of Ulu during the Festival of the pumpkin Leaves in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*.

And what is the inevitable outcome of all this? The performer(s) are inducted, by slow, unconscious and informal process into imbibing the language panegyrics and spoken art which is apart from the principles movement art, song and dance. It is significant that the performers learn all these only through a process of involvement in composite masquerade art: the art of making appliqués, wood carving, sculptural designs and so on, all of which are skills in the arts.

And yet, women were excluded in all this learning process whereas, in comparison with western societies, women took full advantage of learning.

### *Political Ideals and Public Space in Pre-Literate Igbo Society*

This is the difference. Besides, it is of the nature of the masquerade tradition itself, its function and role in society to act as charter for the perpetuation of the male child as the entity vested with ritual authority when on taking the *ozo* title, but we will come to this later.

Did this mean that women were totally sidelined in the performing arts among the Nri-Igbo? Available evidence suggests that this is not the case. According to Helen Chukwuma, women “usually have one or two gifted performers (220)” Chukwuma is perhaps referring to the association of married women –*inyomdi*, married into a lineage that has constituted itself into a performance group. The other group is that of *umuokpu* –association of daughters of the lineage. It has to be noted that this two women’s groups representing the lineage are cases suggesting women’s involvement in the theatrical activities of sorts but certainly not masquerade theatre. The two chief occasions of the appearance of these groups are during the birth of a child and secondly, during funeral occasions or on such social events of the gathering of the lineage or village group. To be sure, the two most common ceremonies during which women performed is at the outing ceremony of a child, or during the funeral ceremony of a member of the group. On such occasions the setting is within the compound of the member and as such, the performance may be rightly described as indoors. In contrast to the masquerade performances by the males who actually arrive at the venue of the event from outside, what can be said is that male performances are mainly executed outdoors at the market square, arena, or particular streets and highways designated as the route of particular *mmuo* or masquerade and his escorts.

These twin concepts of outdoor and indoor performances of the males and the females in the Nri-Igbo society respectively, constitute the philosophical basis of our inquiry into male/female involvements into public space. For women, what is more noticeable is the restricted, private or indoor space. This is so mostly when it concerns social dramas of the types already referred to. Our attempt to separate, or dichotomize male and female spheres of performance contexts does not include mixed contexts during, say, the celebration of the new moon. Males and females partook in this event as a sort of opportunity (or safety valve) for social licentiousness.

That apart, in the social dramas referred to above, it is interesting to observe the switching of roles by the genders. Female actors performed male roles in an all women cast, while males actors performed female roles in similar situations in which they found themselves. The most celebrated of this case of switching of role is obvious in masquerade displays where men put on costumes designed for women where they are performing female roles as *agboghommuo*, (Enekwe, Ugonna.) this concerns female roles taken over by the men disguised as women, their mask-head hiding their identities. As Chukwuma has put it concerning the *agboghommuo* masquerade, the mask-heads represent female motifs “though carried by male dancers (213). Enekwe is precise on this when he states that in the play *Ogolimaluihe*, for instance, that there are these representations of female masquerades

### ***Ogonna Anagudo-Agu***

characterized by male performers. They include the *Ogoli*, wife of *Ezemmuo*, who “illustrates the right behaviors of women” but ironically they are played by men behind the masks.

#### ***Learning and the Political Ethos:***

We have witnessed similar trends of males playing female roles starting from Athens through the Elizabethan era to the Nri-gbo of Nigeria. This tends to do with instances where male actors always played the role of female characters. Here the question arises: Is it a universal phenomenon for male actors to play female roles and vice versa, or simply a matter of roles for social structuring? As our study has gone to show, it must be the latter case. However, although we have demonstrated in some length that women are performers of sorts, they still are not visible by all standards and therefore largely unpopular when compared to the male groups of masquerade performers. We have noted earlier that the cause is that masquerades, being male oriented and therefore a public activity, women’s groups of dancers are mostly private performers. In other words, women perform for members of their intra-group, whereas masquerades perform from the extra-group members of society. Where they often meet for a public competition is at a central location, usually the market square. It is from here that we can now conclude, following Onwejeogwu, that masquerade performances is connected with “politics” in the folk sense of the word. According to this foremost scholar of Nri-Igbo traditions, and as the scholar has put it in his book *Nri Kingdom and Hegemony*: By the age of nine a Nri-boy has taken about six or seven titles which are directed towards transforming him into a social and ritual personality. At about nine he takes the sixth and ninth title, but this title has special significance because for the first time the child is brought indirectly into the area of political action. This title is *ima mmonwu* that, knows the secret of the ritual mask (78).

Now, let us take a look at the above statement to know its expresses political values and ideals in society.

We understand that learning is associated with certain informal performances of which masquerade outings and displays is a major one. By this education, the individual is socialized on the state level. Title taking, being similar to obtaining a university degree, then promotes him to the higher steps. The Nri boy, states Onwejeogwu, takes six to seven titles in the first stage, which is also comparable to obtaining promotion from the lower form to the higher forms, and so on. At this point he transforms into a social personality, and recognized as an accepted member of society. He is popular in all the village groups.

At this stage he is also a candidate aspiring to acquire ritual personality as priest of a shrine. But it is the ninth title, which he takes while he is nine, that is the most critical of all, and which brings him into the sphere of political action. At this stage, his title taking comes to a climax when he attempts to know the secret of the ritual mask.



### ***Political Ideals and Public Space in Pre-Literate Igbo Society***

It is in this ritual mask, and the folklore and other resources open to it to draw on, that is lodged the sacred values and constitution of the village group. As Enekwe has put it, “ancestral masks, such as *Odo* and *Omabe*, usually teach their audiences through songs made up of strings of proverbial sayings. *In the process, the primacy of society is affirmed* (91) (*Italics mine.*)

#### ***From Masquerade performances to Political Eloquence:***

Joining the masquerade cult in itself a title of its own, but because it is a stage in a process, not many would appreciate the political import of the action. In the Nri-Igbo society, it is not enough to be born into it, it is important too that one achieves a right of membership of the society. This alone separates you, in the first instance, from the rest of the nonentities, or *ogboju*. The other factor to consider is that as masquerade performances in the domain of popular theatre, it turns performers into popular personalities. By turning into such personalities, the members of society are gradually becoming visible personalities as they draw nearer into the public space first as social beings, then as ritual personalities to be consulted, and then as political personalities.

But a pertinent question to ask is, at the age of nine would the boys have been ripe enough to saddle political responsibilities? At nine, the boys have completed their learning, and greater days for being involved in the affairs of society lay ahead for him. . In fact, not until he takes the title of *ozo* is he ever considered adult in society. It is true that at a tender age a child nominally takes the *ozo* but that is like saying giving him a hen to look after that is sad to be his. In fact, *ozo* title taking, in many Nri Igbo societies takes place after the demise of the man’s father, meaning that he must have had a wife or wives and grown up children.

And this brings us to the concluding part of this essay dealing with the involvement of individuals in masquerade cults as a process of acquiring ritual personalities and, by implication, political personality.

#### ***Eloquence as a Political ideal Among the Nri-Igbo:***

There is no doubt that in the value system of the Nri-Igbo eloquence is a political ideal, and this is what unites masquerade traditions with politics as a means of representation for decision making. We can see how true this assertion can be when we take look at some of the “political” personalities in some of Achebe’s novels. Ezeulu and Ezeidemili represent two active figure heads and both of them with priestly functions and political undertones on the public level of the conflict in the novel.

Indeed, both of these personalities are among the distinguished elders of the clan. We assume that most elders like Ezeulu and Ezeidemili might have undergone through similar process, taking the lesser titles in their youths through involvement in masquerade activities, and now active participants in the affairs of society. We make this assertion simply to justify, and affirm the power of eloquence of these elders.

### ***Ogonna Anagudo-Agu***

At the stage of their involvement in the politics of Umuaro, Ezeulu, like his adversary Ezeidemmili has become a man of eloquence in articulating political views. Being an elder gives his view added advantage. This is because elders speak with cadence, and everything they said was measured and deliberate. For this group of personalities, words are very important and carefully selected. Take the situation where Ezeulu informs of his invitation by Winterbottom. The speech is structured, with the usual salutation of *Igbo kwenu* and the courtesy that goes with it in form of preamble before the main speech. This preamble is purely in the tradition of the phatic communion; a preamble whereby Ezeulu prepares the ground before launching his main topic aimed at creating goodwill and solidarity. Even Ezeulu's speech in the gnomic tradition suggests that he must have been to the same bush school as Ezeidemmili. Where masquerade language is compressed language embodying a crystallized meaning.

And then Ezeulu's chants and incantations while recounting the coming of Ulu, and which in every way represents the magical use of language by masquerade groups when in action in the arena. Ezeulu is a man who annihilates time and space due to his heightened sense of drama, through mythopoeia language, of the primal beginning of the confederated states. Because such a learning and eloquence could come from his learning in bush schools, in such knowledge is crystallized the essential belief systems of the people. Well ahead of time, Ezeulu was on the way of representing the interests of his deity in a political kind of gathering as he had successfully done in the novel.

### **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, we stated that in the masquerade art of the theatre among the Nri-Igbo learning is of essence and best described as a form of bush school where informal instructions in group ways is imparted. This learning is certainly traditional in form and content; it is also a form of learning in language panegyrics through proverbial lore, folklore, myths and legends of origin of the village group and its universe; of tangible and intangible things, spirits and mysterious places in the land and so on. It is the totality of this learning process, and in a language deep in proverbial lore and transmitted through a vibrant theatrical activity comprising songs and dance movements and poetry that prepares him in rhetoric and eloquence. It is this mixed kit of knowledge in material and occult powers that prepares him to become an active participant in the affairs of society.

We also stated that title taking represented stages in the course of learning in Nri-Igbo society which a young boy undertakes by the age of nine. We stated that this does not automatically invest him with the right to represent lineage groups at the gathering of the village group, and that as learning continues through life there is ample time for the individual to grow into a ritual and political personality.

### *Political Ideals and Public Space in Pre-Literate Igbo Society*

We made the point that in all this, it is the power of speech of the protagonist, and ability to achieve his purposes through persuasion at a public forum when matters arise, that marks him out as a political personality. This derives principally from informal involvement in masquerade performances whereby youths are socialized; as such it should be seen as an index of this political ideal. Ezeulu and Ezeidemili in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* grew to become such powerful speakers, as Obika in *Things Fall Apart* by the same author. It cannot be thought otherwise, everything seemed to point to their involvement in sectarian masquerading representing sectarian beliefs and ideologies.

These views have been based on the depth of knowledge derived from Ossie Enekwe's study of Igbo masks as theater scholar. His understanding of Igbo theatre as ritual and entertainment is unrivalled. If Enekwe taught, and demonstrated that in Igbo theatre there is a oneness of ritual and theatre, the anthropologist Onwuejeogwu taught and demonstrated that in Igbo masquerade traditions there is a oneness of ritual and politics as reckoned in Nri-Igbo philosophy and ideology in preliterate times. How this came about is what we have attempted to explicate in this study.

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