GOVERNANCE AND ASSOCIATED SOCIAL ROLES OF MASQUERADES AMONG THE IGBO OF SOUTHEAST NIGERIA IN AN ERA OF GLOBALIZATION: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL.

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Abstract

The objectives of this paper are twofold. First is to verify and document governance and associated social roles played by masquerades among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria. The second objective is to account for how globalization has impacted on such roles of masquerades over the years and to recommend the way forward. Two social Anthropological methods were combined and complemented library research for optimum results. These are oral interviews and participant observation. The researcher used oral interview delivered in Igbo language to gather information that was later analyzed and integrated. Those interviewed included purposively selected elders, titled men, church leaders, shrine priests, women leaders, community executives, and masquerade cult members. Participant Observation took the form of the researcher personally observing aspects of masquerade activities of Igbo people. Being an initiate of the masquerade cult, the researcher participated in the social functions of the group. The method of participant observation proved particularly useful to this study because it ensured a relaxed environment in which responses or activities of subjects remained natural and genuine given their familiarity with the researcher. The study found that among the Igbo, masquerades perform very important governance and associated social roles relevant to control of social behavior of members of the society. However, the impact of globalization and social change on masquerade roles has been tremendous over the years. Also, urbanization, Western education, colonization and Christian religion have affected the traditional roles of masquerades in a number of ways. Despite the impact of these factors, masquerades have remained resilient and an important feature of socio-political life of Igbo society. Their operations have undergone modifications instead of total decay and are still used in contemporary times. It was recommended, among other things, that activities of masquerades be enshrined in legal status of the Igbo area to strengthen them and protect those who enforce such masquerade rights

Keywords: masquerades, governance, social control, globalization, social roles

Introduction

The Igbo or *Ndigbo* constitute one of the three principal ethnic groups in Nigeria. They are found in Anambra, Imo, Abia, Enugu and Ebonyi states including parts of Delta and Rivers states of Nigeria. According to Ifemesia (1979:15), the Igbo country covers an area of over 15,800 square miles. Nwala (1985:15) posits this area to be roughly circumscribed between six and eight and half degrees East Longitude; and four and half to seven and half degrees North Latitude. The descriptions comprise the forest belt area between the Cross River and Benin, west of the Niger, and between the Igala to the North and the Niger Delta city states to the south.

The Igbo are bounded and in close neighbourhood with the Tiv, Idoma and Igala in the North, Ijaw in the South, Urhobo, Edo and Isoko in the West, while Ibibio and Yako are

at the eastern boundary. Igboland is one of the most densely populated areas of West Africa. Ifemesia (1979:15) estimates the population of the Igbo to about fifteen million.

The major occupation of the traditional Igbo group was agriculture, but they also engaged in other economic activities like commerce, fishing, mining, smiting and local crafts. Production was not on a large scale and the family served as the basic unit of production. There is a high spirit of industry reinforced by strong emphasis on achieved status in the Igbo society.

The physical features of the Igbo area composed of rivers and their swamps, hills and the forests. Of particular importance was the dense tropical forest whose impenetrable nature influenced the lives of the Igbo people in a number of ways. It protected them from external attacks. As a consequence, there was no conquest of the Igbo people through history as was the case of the Hausas of northern Nigeria.

The impact of the forest also united with other ideals of the Igbo society like love of personal freedom and zero tolerance of autocratic government to give birth to segmented lineage organization practiced in Igbo areas. A lineage group was usually separated and without intense socio-political interaction with another by the thick forests that lay between them. Consequently, there had never existed a well-organized central authority or a monarchial ruler lording over the entire Igbo country. The people lived in small village republics (i.e. segmented village groups) on the basis of close genealogical relationship.

Chukwuezi (1990) notes that it is within the village group that various norms, values, ethos and other cultural practices that bind the Igbo group together are internalized. Each village group posses her paraphernalia of government and authority which is diffused among all adult males, the titled men, elders, secret societies (masquerades), age-grades, women groups and influential or wealthy opinion leaders, etc. Members of a village group see themselves as closely related to one another as to members of other villages and experience more social interaction with one another thus internalizing group norms that enhance governance, social harmony and control.

The village group is therefore a very important social unit in the Igbo country within which are located diverse socio-political frameworks which operate to ensure consensus and social solidarity of the group in the first instance, and then the entire Igbo nation by extension. Other social units range from the nuclear family, extended family, major and maximal patrilineages etc.

Among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria, masquerades (*Mmonwu*) were conceived as ancestral spirits whose interest in the affairs of their living descendants compel them to visit the community during festivals, funerals and when things are not normal in the community Since the traditional setting till contemporary times, such masquerades discharge very important social roles which are governance and social control in character among others. Membership of masquerade groups were however restricted to initiated male adults and in absence of sophisticated secret societies, the masquerade groups are the nearest approximation in the area.

Unfortunately, globalization defined as the flow of information, goods, capital and people across political and economic boundaries has affected the roles of masquerades in Igbo societies in a number of ways. Burbules and Torres (2000), argues that the process of globalization blurs national boundaries in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa. Lee (2000) on his part, sees globalization as the process of closer interaction of human activity across a range of spheres, including the economic, social, political and cultural, experienced along three dimensions: spatial, temporal and cognitive.

This research paper has two major objectives. First, is to document the governance and associated social roles played by masquerades among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria.

Secondly, the paper examined how globalization has impacted on traditional roles of masquerades among the Igbo with recommendations on the way forward

Methods

Two social Anthropological methods were combined and complemented library research in this study for optimum results. These are oral interviews and participant observation. The researcher used oral interview delivered in Igbo language to gather information that was later analyzed and integrated. Those interviewed included purposively selected elders, titled men, church leaders, shrine priests, women leaders, town union executives, and masquerade cult members.

Participant observation took the form of the researcher personally observing aspects of life of Igbo people. By virtue of being an initiate of the masquerade cult, the researcher participated in the social functions of the group. The method of participant observation proved particularly useful to this study because it ensured a relaxed environment in which the reaction of the subjects remained natural and genuine given their familiarity with the researcher. It enabled an in-depth access and documentation of many aspects of masquerade roles among the Igbo that would have escaped through other methods. In the course of participation, caution was taken to avoid bias to ensure that findings are true reflections of reality without exaggerations or reductions of facts.

Theoretical Framework

The role of masquerades in governance and other associated social roles among the Igbo have been discussed by scholars using functionalist, interactionist, social exchange (reciprocity) and conflict theoretical models with emphasis on social control. However, none of these theoretical perspectives can fully explain the phenomenon without a deep appreciation of the level of socio-economic and political complexity of the society under study.

The conflict tradition which sees social control as state control designed to protect the interest of a privileged few is obviously deficient in explaining the phenomena of social control involving masquerades among the Igbo. The interests protected by masquerades are those of the entire society and not for privileged few. The exchange model with emphasis on personal rewards is more economical and less sociological and anthropological in approach.

This research adopts the structural functionalist framework. Masquerades constitute part of the social structure of the Igbo society under study. The functions of masquerades are defined in terms of contributions they make towards easy governance, maintenance of consensus and group solidarity. Thus, masquerades remain one of the most influential structures in traditional Igbo society alongside the village assembly, women association and titled men association etc. Their functions include the implementation of rules and the adoption of relevant mechanisms or sanctions to ensure compliance and system stability.

Findings on Governance and associated Social Roles of Masquerades among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria

Governance and Social Control Roles

In both traditional and contemporary Igbo communities, alongside council of elders, age-grades, priest of deities, etc, masquerades have a lot of roles to play when it comes to the issue of governance, social control and maintenance of peace and order. Because they are seen as spirits in the physical realm, people accord a lot of respect to them. Writing on

the role of masquerades in rule application among the Igbo, Ogbonna (1984:4) argued along with P.M Weil that the masked figures provide a mechanism through which the probability of sustained divisive conflict is decreased by converting secular actions of rule application into sacred, supra social actions. This assertion is still very true of all Igbo communities today.

Similarly, Takena Tamuno (1966:103) had observed that masked dancers purporting to represent the spirit cult were used whenever there was difficulty in enforcing law and order in Igbo communities. This is another indication that masquerades were probably more efficient than the ordinary human elements in rule application.

As social control agents, masquerades were unchallengeable. They intervened in land disputes, summoned people for communal work and collected levies from deviants. They were dreaded and thought to have power of life and death. Individuals were therefore unwilling and socially restrained from deviant behavior for fear of attracting the wrath of masquerades.

In Mbaukwu and Umuawulu communities in Awka South local government area of Anambra state, notable masquerades include *'Ayolo', Udo', 'Aji-kwu'* and *'Onyekuluye'*. These masquerades performed varied functions of rule application, entertainment and social control. The *'Ayolo'* may be brought in to discipline children who are disobedient or to flog women who cook when others have gone to bed. The *'Onyekuluye'* appeared only at night and performed a social function of using satirical songs and ridicule to criticize the defects in the behavior of any member of the community and thereby press for change. The *'Ayolo'* and *'Udo'* entertain the community during festivals. They are also found useful for rule application and enforcement of proper social order. Other masquerade can also be used to bring order in existence and the targets of these masquerades are people who are violating the laws of the society. Indeed, *Ayolo* and *Udo* are task force masquerades and could be employed to bring chronic deviants back to order.

In his assessment of the role of masquerades in governance, prevention and reformation of deviants in traditional Igbo society a respondent insists that:

> The traditional man was very concerned of his good name and therefore most willing to adjust his anti-social behavior along accepted lines rather than have his name ridiculed in the dead night by voices representing those of his ancestors whom he longed to join in subsequent life". In his view, to disobey the masquerade is to be at crossroad with both the living and the dead which no man attempted to be (male, 83 years old).

Some masquerade in Igbo traditional societies are not seen by young people, women and pregnant women. They walk at night, and early in the morning, e.g. *Obianuchichi* (coming in the shadows of the night) is seen in Ugbenu, a village in Awka North Local Government Area of Anambra State of Nigeria. The primary obligation of this masquerade is to break into the house of anybody that defaults the laws of the land and destroy whatever it can lay its hands on and urges the person to pay to the society whatever it is demanding.

Showing Maturity or Manhood

In Igbo traditional society, masquerade is also used to separate boys from men. Things of masquerade have to do with possession of the ultimate physical strength. Weak people do not wear big masquerades like "*Ijele*" the biggest masquerade in Igbo land, In Igbo society masquerade is one of the means through which the physically strongest is

notified. With this exercise the strongest is separated from the weak, and through this the community is able to raise warriors that protect the kingdom from immediate enemy.

Form of Sports for Uniting Neighboring Villages

Masquerade is another means Igbo societies integrate with each other. Masquerade in those days is like today's intercontinental football and Olympic game. Masquerade also plays this role of unification among people of different cultural heritage in the African society. This very masquerade game or masquerade festival still exists in many African societies. Chiene (1990), Obuh (1984), and Onyeneke (1987) all made references to the one of *Izu-ogu* as an example. **Izu-ogu** is a town in Abia State of Nigeria. Abia State is a State in Igboland. In Izu-ogu, there is the festival called **Ikeji**, it is one of the most populous annual festivals in Igboland. During this festival people from near and far of Izu-ogu do come to Izu-ogu to witness this annual festival, this very festival makes everybody a full participant provided the person wishes to participate, *Ikeji* is a festival of masquerade where the owners come to present and show their cultural heritage.

Also in this *Ikeji* masquerade festival, there is a price to be won, at the end of the festival any masquerade that is able to untie a ram that is being tied to a stick with a single thread becomes the winner of this annual masquerade festival and the entire crowd sings a song of praise to the masquerade as it goes home. Through this festival, neighboring villages and clans have come to know each other better, both by name and by the beauty of their diverse cultural heritage.

Showing of Spiritual Power

Masquerade is one of the frameworks of showcasing one's spiritual power publicly without attracting unnecessary attentions among the Igbo. During festivals, masquerades and people around them exercise their spiritual power publicly; it is an act and a game also. It is through this means that the community comes to know the people with zenith powers of the forefathers. After the masquerade display, the one with the ultimate power brings honor to every member of his family when pronounced as winner.

Means of Entertainment

There is no entertainment in the Igbo society like masquerade and music. To be specific masquerade is the biggest entertainer in Igbo land coming from the cultural settings of the tribe. Masquerade plays important role from the beginning till the end of every festival or ceremony in Igbo traditional society. In every Igbo land, there is this popular festival called yam festival (**Iri Ji ofuu**). This festival is an annual festival and it is characterized by the celebration of first tubers of yam harvested from the farm, the Igbo communities gather the yam together and eat it together in the day of this ceremony. Using this festival as a case study in Igbo land, the role of masquerade is innumerable; they are the first to start the ceremony, patrolling around the neighborhood adding glamour to the keen eyes of the visitors and the villagers who are expecting the wonderful act of the gods in manifestation as masquerades. The role of masquerade as entertainers is unquantifiable; it is still these masquerades that massively present themselves as the chief celebrant in the new yam festival. This is because at the end of the celebration people never cease to stop telling how they are being thrilled by the groundbreaking performance of these masquerades.

In burial ceremonies and other kinds of celebration in Igbo land, masquerades are employed to lift the occasion beyond measures. Basically, in most Igbo societies, every

occasion, ceremony or festival where masquerade is not presented, the participants of the occasion do see the event as a mockery or inconclusive.

Initiation of Males into Manhood

Masquerade is the only means in the Igbo traditional society of initiating or turning of an Igbo boy to "Igbo man". This initiation is generally called in the entire Igbo land as '*Ima mmuowu*' (knowing the spirits). "*Mmuowu*" means masquerade and masquerade in Igbo land means spirits (see Chiene 1990, Obuh 1984, and Onyeneke 1987) . It is believed that the moment a child is initiated into masquerade cult; automatically the child becomes a man. Any child who has been initiated into the masquerade cult becomes eligible to sit with the elders of the land, they will only be denied of this right only if the matter arising is strictly for elders. Thus, masquerade is used as a yardstick for measuring and classifying boys and men. Those who have been initiated into the masquerade cult are accorded with roles and obligations unlike the armatures that are yet to be initiated.

This issue of initiation brings about role segregation and social stratification of every Igbo male child. Masquerades play the role of ascribing maturity to people who are into it, and immaturity to the people who are not into it. All of these are the roles of masquerades in governance of Igbo traditional society.

Impact of Globalization and Social Change on Governance and associated Social Roles of Masquerades among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria

The world today is often regarded as a 'global village'. Although countries have well-defined geographical territories and their citizens live in separate apartments and neighbourhoods in their area, yet there has been an increased level of human proximity across national boundaries over the years. People are now living in each other's metaphorical pockets and issues that ordinarily may affect one group, now has supra-territorial dimensions and transcends the geopolitical boundaries of each nation.

The network of connections of organizations and people across national and cultural borders; the quick flow of information, human traffic, money, goods and services across the globe; and the situation where economic, political and cultural activities are not only interconnected but individuals and nations increasingly find themselves influenced from a distance, are developments that have far reaching implications for the political, socio-economic and health status of states.

Lee (2000) discussed three dimensions or changes occasioned by globalization as outlined below:
(a) **Spatial Changes:** Globalization affects how people perceive and experience physical or territorial space. Movements of people, other life forms, information, capital, goods and services have not only intensified across borders of countries but, in some cases, has rendered national border irrelevant. Trafficking of illicit drugs, cigarette, smuggling, undocumented migration, money laundering and global climate change are trans- border phenomena that are challenging the capacity of governments to effectively regulate them. New social geographies are being formed that redefined how individuals and populations interact with each other. Even more novel is the creation of new forms of space, such as cyberspace and virtual reality which challenge traditional notions of a physical location.

(b) **Temporal Changes:** Globalization affects how people perceive and experience time. On the one hand, social interaction is speeding up through modern

communication and transportation technologies. Also, people's lives are slowed down by modern bureaucracies and grid locked roads.

(c)   **Cognitive Changes**: Globalization is profoundly influencing how we see ourselves and the world around us. The main agents here are the mass media, the advertising industries, consultancy firms, research institution, political parties, religious groups and the other institutions seeking to win "hearts and minds". In the process our cultures, wants or perceived needs, values and beliefs, knowledge and aspirations are being changed.

For Jary and Jary (2000), globalization is multi-faceted and includes these aspects:
  i.   The transformation of the spatial arrangement and organization of social relations involving 'action at a distance'
  ii.   The increasing extensity, intensity, velocity and impact of global social relation and transactions.
  iii.   The creation of new networks 'network society' associated with new levels of dependence on information and expert systems (i.e. information or knowledge society) as well as new risks associated with this 'Risk society'
  iv.   A dialect between the global and the local, in which the outcome is not a simple triumph of the centre over the periphery, but mere 'Americanization' or such like.

Globalization is therefore a step towards international integration in which people of the world are unified into a single society. In globalization, there is decoupling of space and time (Giddens, 2002); convergence of social preferences in matters of lifestyle and social values (Kahn, 2003); and diminishing importance of geographical distance in cross border economic, political and socio-cultural relations. Indeed, globalization systematically restructures interactive phases among nations, breaking down barriers in the areas of culture, commerce, communication etc. As a capitalist economic ideology, it pushes for free-market economy, liberal democracy, good governance, gender equality and environmental sustainability among other values.

The concept of globalization cannot be easily divorced from "liberalization" since it seeks to remove all national barriers to free movement of capital and aims at homogenization of ideas, cultures, lifestyles, values as well as deterritorialization and villagization of the world (see Waters 1995, Robinson 1991, Jary and Jary 2000, Scheafer 2005).

It must be noted that globalization is not a value-free and self-determining process. Economic globalization is consciously engineered by capitalist ideology of the West and facilitated by supranational institutions (such as International Monetary Fund and World Bank), and transnational corporations whose decisions shape and constrain the policy options of nation states in similar direction (Burbules and Torres, 2000).

Although political and cultural dimensions of globalization are more self-propelling than the economic aspect, the former have also tilted heavily toward infiltration of Western cultural and political landmarks into the shores of developing nations. As in the economic sphere, there has been gross imbalance in the cross-border flow of cultural and political attributes which slants to the advantage of the West. We can now summarize globalization as encompassing:

⬦   Internationalization: cross – border relations between countries.

- ♦ Liberalization: removal of government imposed restrictions on movement.
- ♦ Universalization – spread of various objects and experiences.
- ♦ Westernization or modernization – dynamism
- ♦ Deterritoralisation – spread of supraterritoriality.

According to Korten (1972:3) societies throughout the world are finding themselves in the midst of change; new expectations, new possibilities, new pressures are uprooting the lifestyle of nearly all the world's culture. This important observation is also true of Igbo society whose modes of social control have suffered the impact of social change and undergone modifications over the years.

Globalization has generated a situation where Igbo masquerades are now merely seen as similar to masked figures in other cultures seen especially during carnivals in such cultures. This new mode of perception has negatively affected the sacredness, respect and functions of masquerades among the Igbo in recent times. Also, globalization has exposed cultures where masquerades are less emphasized and incompletely covered up and showing physical bodies of human beings. As a result, people are now seeing masquerades in the Igbo nation as **'human beings in masks'** as against the original traditional interpretation that defines them as **'spirits from ancestral worlds'.** Accordingly, obedience to the injunctions of masquerades is becoming weak.

Similarly, many forces of modernization such as urbanization, western education, Christianity, the experience of colonization were responsible for such changes. The effect of these forces and the modifications that occurred to the roles of masquerades in governance and social control are examined below.

Effects of Urbanization

The British colonization of Nigeria brought with it the introduction of monetized economy. Consequently, the urban areas because of industries and job opportunities concentrated therein attracted people from all cultures in search of money. People from rural Igbo communities accordingly migrated from their traditional homesteads to growing cities in quest for paid jobs.

In the cities they lived and interacted with people of completely different cultural background and have had to learn and imbibe some of the cultures which have in turn affected their reactions to masquerades and their roles in governance and traditional social control. Even worse is the trend were some deviant members of the community run to urban centres to take refuge and to escape sanction. There they make new friends and join some organizations which give them social, emotional and economic security which they lacked among their people at home.

A respondent observed the trend with dismay and lamented that apart from receiving deviants and the alien experience in the urban areas,

> Dreaded night masquerades of various Igbo communities (who detest light) are now forced to perform under shinning electric bulbs which give women and children the advantage to watch them from hiding positions. The result was that the sacredness of those masquerades became doubtful and people began to disobey them (Male, 78 years old).

The roles of masquerades in governance and social control therefore lost effective hold on the people as a result of urbanization and other factors.

The Effects of Western Education and Christianity

Nwala (1985:24) stressed the impact of western education on the Igbo group. According to him, since the advent of colonialism and with it, the forces of western intellectual tradition (in addition to oriental influences), and the Igbo man has undergone tremendous changes in his conception about life. Consequently, the traditional mode of life with all its apparent unity and conformism has fallen apart. Education and Christianity affected the family structure which became increasingly patterned toward nuclear design with little or no attachment to the extended family system. These changes have weakened the importance of the masquerade as an agent of governance and social control.

Christianity questioned the traditional belief systems upon which most social control and entertainment functions of masquerades where rooted. The power of deities and the chief priest were disregarded by new Christian converts. The curses of the ancestors were no longer dreaded by the Christians. Today, deviants whose offences require sacrifices and ritual cleansing have declined such rites on the ground that they are Christians. Therefore allegiance to Christian religion and the impact of western education have in no small way undermined the traditional roles of masquerades in governance and social control among the Igbo. This is largely because the belief systems that supported them are now being questioned by Christian viewpoints.

Colonial Experience and Socio-Political Changes

The colonial experience wielded different cultural units into a geo-political entity called 'Nigeria'. The Nigerian nation established her socio-political and economic institutions. She put in place a modern judiciary and police through which people can seek redress for wrongs done to them. These new structures made the option of masquerades less important. Furthermore, social life in Igbo communities has witnessed an increased wave of individuality and nuclear cleavage where people face inwards and ignore the extended family. In such situations, masquerades which thrive on group support lost appreciable measure of its importance.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite the impact of the enunciated factors, the roles of masquerades in governance and social control have remained resilient. The level of social cohesion in traditional and contemporary Igbo society has remained reasonably high. This assertion does not suggest the absence of deviants in the system but points to the presence of reliable mechanisms and agents for controlling and re-integrating them. This paper extensively reviewed the operations of masquerades and found that they were not only effective in bringing deviants to conformity but also served as an important governance structure among the Igbo. Masquerades were strongly involved in the politico-social life of the people. The democratic nature of traditional legal proceedings and the sacredness accorded masquerades made them acceptable to the people and allowed sanctions to have the desired affects. However, many forces of modernization have encroached on the roles of masquerades in governance and social control among the Igbo over the years. Education and Christian religion have affected the people's worldview while urbanization has reduced face-to-face interaction and its advantages in social control. The above forces notwithstanding, the traditional roles of masquerades in governance, social control and entertainment have withstood the test of time. They have continued to function though with modifications. There is still a high level of acceptance or preference for the traditional roles

of masquerades in governance and social control in contemporary Igbo society despite the forceful incursion of modern control mechanisms. Accordingly, in the absence of pre-planned format for co-existence of the two models of social control, clashes become manifest. Some negative sanctions imposed by masquerades for some unacceptable behaviour now come into conflict with legal codes.

Against the above background, there is need to sieve the best elements from both modern and traditional roles of masquerades and integrate them. There is need for the role of masquerades in governance and social control in the Igbo nation to be accommodated in law books applicable in the area. This will attract more vigour to such roles and protect individuals who enforce them from being accused of taking laws into their hands. This is particularly important because the role of masquerades is relative to time and space. They are products of the people's culture and belief system.

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