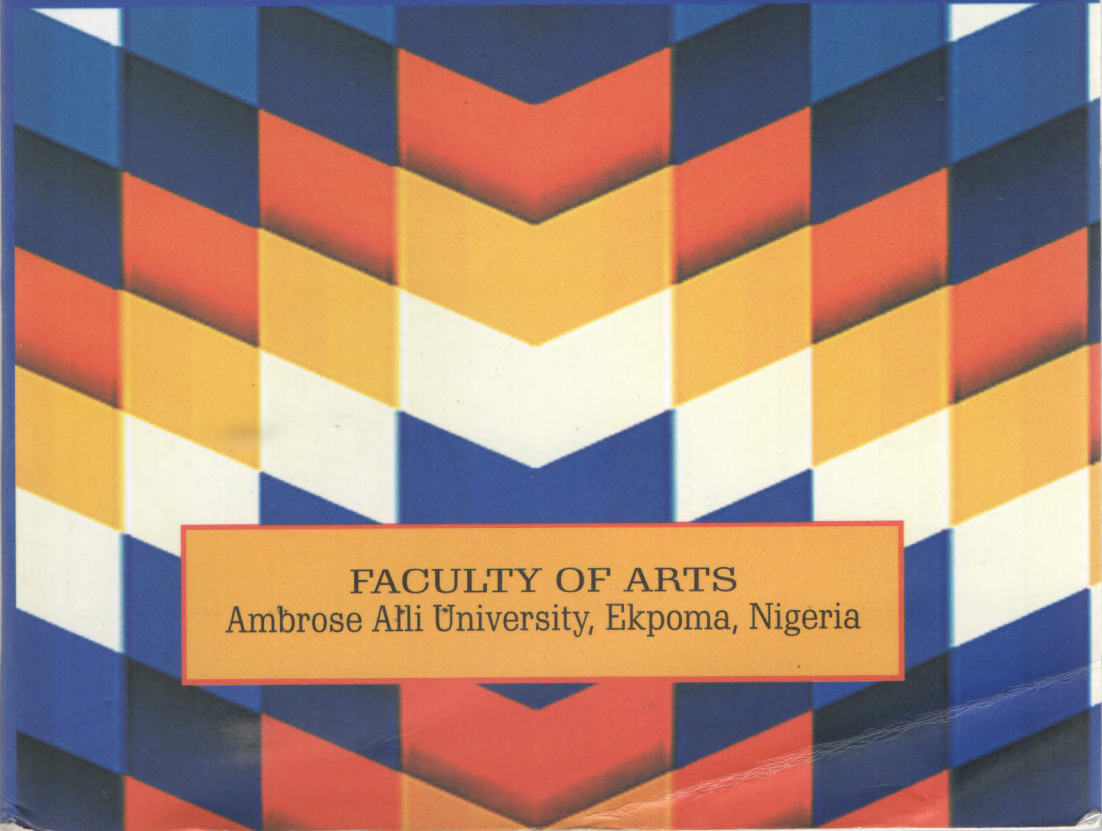


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## **ESSENCE, CONCEPT AND MASQUERADE PERFORMANCES OF THE IDOMA PEOPLE OF NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

*Masquerade performances abound in Idomaland like in most African cultures. They are institutionalised to help strengthen the religious, cultural and social spaces. Masquerades and their societies are respected and venerated in Idoma culture as they serve as a medium to bridge the gap between the living and the dead. They are used in most cases to represent the spirit of the dead. Against this backdrop, this study appraises the essence and concept of masquerade performances of the Idoma people. Employing literary and interview methods, it investigates the functionalities of masquerades. Among other findings, this study reveals that masquerades in Idomaland connect the living and the spirit as they help to translate and mediate between the two worlds. Conclusively, masquerades in Idoma culture do not only earn their respect and attraction from verbal narratives, they also have other appeals such as their nuances in performance, beats of drum-rhythms of various repertoires from the drummers and the singers who produce the music for entertainment.*

**Keywords:** *Masquerade performances, Idoma, Entertainment, Verbal narratives, Music*

### **Introduction**

Masquerade culture is a prominent feature of indigenous African societies. This stems from the fact that it is interwoven with the beliefs of the people and helps to define the meaning and essence of life and death, as well as serve as a mediator between man, the spirit and the unknown. Masquerade performances facilitate collaboration in creative African artistry in expressive forms and styles using music, dance, drama, costume, property, chant, incantations, and so on. These practices are prevalent in Idoma culture. However, postmodern culture has created new dimensions to viewing/assessing masquerade performances. These dimensions

have further created critical perspectives to the reading of these performances. Most of these perspectives are critical of masquerade performances, and this is contextualised in Christianity and Islam. These two Abrahamic religions see masquerade performances as a “pure worship of different gods. It is demonic and evil from the outset of time. The strengths of the witch and traditional doctors are bound within the masquerades, so much so that . . . those who go behind those masks go as far as putting their life on line” (Obi, 2015, p. 49).

The demonisation of masquerade performances is a misappropriation of the context of masquerades. Advocates of other religions continue to revel in the displacement of the masquerade tradition. However, Balogun (1979) refutes this unwholesome notion. He articulates that:

Masquerade performances among nearly all African peoples are a typical example of this form of communicative art. In general, the masquerade . . . is a physical embodiment of a non-materialised entity (divinity, spirit or ancestor), whose presence is communicated to spectators of the masquerade festival through the appearance, actions and dances of a costumed masquerade player. In these displays, the dimension of ritual drama dominates, for the masquerade or masquerades are performers in a collective dramatic representation which evokes physical interaction between men and gods. In the final analysis, the mask and the costume of the masquerade are in a sense theatre props which enable the masquerade player to act out the role of the divine being or spirit whose presence the display purports to communicate. The mask and the costume are thus adjuncts in the ritual drama of the appearance among men of the divine being whose role the masquerade player performs. (p. 74)

In Idoma culture, masquerade performances help to bridge the gap and create understanding/relationship between the human and the spirit world. This connection and interconnection are believed to protect human beings (adherents of the masquerade cult/ancestral worship) from both human and natural disasters, and ensuring the wellbeing of all living things. Idoko (2004) attests to

this that: the tradition of masquerading could be regarded to mean the ways in which ancestral spirits establish symbiotic relationship or nexus with traditional society. Through masquerades, whether mask or unmasked as they may be used interchangeably here, are an age long tradition in most societies, particularly societies that practice ancestral worship, where supernatural forces, ancestors, as well as spirits considered to be ‘living dead’: interact with the living in order to manifest their powers of control in the collective strength and communality is given vent... (p. 250).

To this end, masquerade performances create communal cohesion between celebrants and the gods. It serves as a nexus; a bridge between the living and the living dead (the term living dead is used since in Idoma culture, it is believed that the dead do not cease to exist. Instead, they transit to another world, where they oversee the affairs of the living). The mystification of the masquerade is predicated on the fact that dead persons do not appear in their physical form. Masks and costumes are made to create an image that fully captures a personality from the land of the dead. Harding (2004) claims that masquerade present nonhuman beings in visible form. These beings may be deities, spirits, or ancestors not normally visible to ordinary people. Most masquerades have spiritual associations and are sacred. While much performance in Africa is designed to be efficacious—that is, to have ‘power’ and be able to affect humans, not simply to entertain—certain masquerades are much more powerful or efficacious than others. It can be said that there are ‘sacred’ masks and ‘secular’ or ‘entertainment’ masks (p. 665). Masquerades make the dead visible. It gives the dead life.

While facilitating a communion between the living and the dead, it also establishes a bond between the world of the living and the dead. Masquerades are “the embodied spirits of the human performers through whom the spirits access the world” (Ododo, 2015, p. 50). These features of masquerade performances are replete in Idoma and Esan cultures. According to Akubor (2016), “masquerades occupy a central position in the mythogonic structure . . . They are organic to their myth of creation. In this way, they function as the major stabiliser of people’s destiny” (p. 35). Omoera and Oseghale earlier noted the forgoing among the Esan (2012, p. 109). The Idoma people have exclusive respect for all masquerades regardless of the age grade. Masquerades are categorised into

different groups and functions in Idoma culture. They are categorised into sacred masquerades, religious masquerades, law enforcement masquerades and social/entertainment masquerades.

### Conceptualising Sacred Masquerades

Sacred masquerades are masquerades with ritual orientation. Masquerades are sacred when they are believed to have supernatural powers. There are certain restrictions in the sacred or ritual masquerade performance. The *Egúngún* of the Yorùbá people, the *Mmwamu* masquerade of the Igbo people, the *Omanuku* masquerade tradition of the Ughelli people of Delta State, Nigeria, are among the numerous sacred masquerades in Nigeria. While women are not allowed to see the *Oro*, it also has the culture of revealing itself only at night. This is the spirit, essence and authenticity of *Oro*. In Idomaland, sacred masquerades include *Achukwu*, *Onyonkpo* and *Ogbulo*. These masquerades are highly secretive and never talked about even among the initiated male folks. Male parents must not freely discuss . . . with their children; initiated members must only hierarchically advance to discover for themselves the aura and other rituals associated with it. It is also a taboo to mention or discuss . . . among women (Akubor, 2016, p. 36).

The above masquerades are revered and their laws are sacrosanct. They perform specific functions as demanded by the society. Like the *Oro*, only initiates and adult males are allowed to see *Achukwu*, *Onyonkpo* and *Ogbulo*. It is forbidden for a child who has not reached the age of puberty or females to see them. Their services are communal and they are communally owned. These societies are headed by elderly men who serve as their spiritual heads and the only direct link to them. In a larger framework, the “tempest masquerade among the Kalabari and Ibani” (Hlaváèová, 2007, p. 82) that produces thunder and lightning which are used for contest, is also a good paradigm of sacred masquerade.

### Religious Masquerades

Religious masquerades serve religious functions. To a large extent, the *Ehoro-Iba* masquerade of the Agbeyeland in Osun State is a good example of such. This is because of “the healing function of *Ehoro-Iba*” (Musa, 2001, p. 116). The *Egbelegbe* spirit masquerade of thunder of the Kalabari people is another example of religious

festival. However, we state that sacred and religious masquerades intersect. This stems from the fact that for religious masquerades to retain their potency, they ought to be sacred. Religious masquerades execute ritual functions. In Idomaland, *Alekwu* and *Eka* are archetypes of religious masquerades. These two religious masquerades “serve as medium for purification, actualising communal goals and provision of checks and balances within the different Idoma societies” (Anyebe, 2015, p. 581). These masquerades come to the fore to cleanse the land when there is plague or misfortune and to bless the inhabitants with bountiful harvest as well as protect the community from impending danger. Religious masquerades also fend off natural disasters. They also legislate and are used for swearing of oath among people in the community.



*Alekwu Masquerade, Photograph taken by the Researcher, 2019.*

### Law Enforcement Masquerades

Masquerades that enforce laws, rules and regulations abound. These masquerades serve as 'police' in the community setup. While they instill discipline among members of the society, they make sure the norms and traditions of the land are adhered to. They serve a dual function. The *Oloolu* Facekuerade (we situate this masquerade in the context of Facekuerade because the performer has the mask on his shoulder, instead of the face). Among the Ibadan people, it serves law enforcement and social/entertainment functions. *Ikpokwu*, *Ikpokwachi*, *Owunekwu* and *Idadu* masquerades are custodians of the rules, norms and regulations in Idomaland. They serve as "means of social control of behaviour. They also keep close watch over the village" (Ugwueze, 2011, p. 58). These masquerades help to stabilise the community and to balance the power between humans and the spirits. They give authority to establish laws. They are highly respected in Idomaland.



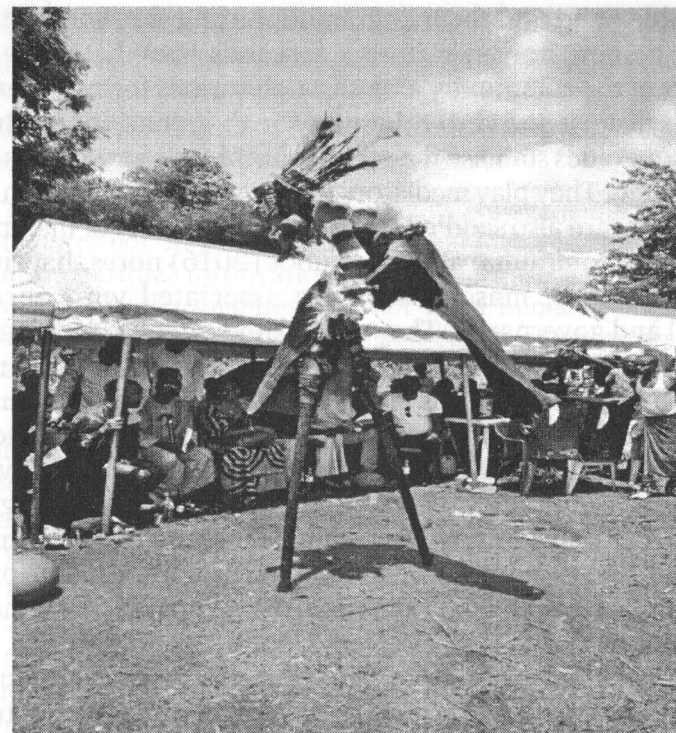
*Ikpokwu Masquerade, Photograph taken by the Researcher, 2019.*

### Social and Entertainment Masquerades

Masquerades serve entertainment functions. In the masquerade performance process, dances and dramatic enactments are made by the masquerade and its acolytes before a viewing audience. The *Ekpe* masquerade performance of *Azunchia* community in Abia State, the *Ogba-Urhie* masquerade drama of Otor-Ughieven community and the *Ukpabor* masquerade art of the Ika people both in Delta State, the *Bekinnaru Sibi* war masquerade of the Kalabari people in Rivers State, among others, are examples of social cum entertainment masquerades. Although they are sacred masquerades, their performances are also geared towards providing relaxation to the audience. In Idomaland, masquerades in the social category, include *Ichaclogo*, *Alinga*, *Ibo*, *Ukpalube*, *Adumayi*, *Akatakpa*, *Ekwuotokpa*, *Olokalika*, *Oyo*, *Ichahoho*, *Odumu* and *Oglinye*. These masquerades "are basically for entertainment. People watch their dances for relaxation . . . dance for money and gifts especially when they go to the home of a relation or a wealthy person" (Ugwueze, 2011, pp. 57-58). The masquerades are unique because, they are accessible to the audience. Non-initiates and non-members of the community are allowed to partake in the performance process. In spite of the social and entertainment dimensions of these masquerades, there still lies a demarcation between the masquerade and the audience.



***Ichahoho, Photograph taken by the Researcher, 2019.***



***Ibo Masquerade Photograph taken by the Researcher, 2019.***

It is relevant to note that some of these masquerades are invited to burial ceremonies, marriages and other social functions to entertain partygoers. The secrecy associated with this type of masquerade is not rigid as in most cases the actor in the costume is an open secret to the female folks who by culture should not know or be involved in masquerading. Masquerades of entertainment appear during the day. Some others such as *Alekwu*, *Achukwu* and *Onyonkpo*, perform in the day and at night, while others such as *Ogbulo* only appear at night. In Igbo societies, night masquerades abound. Ezeliora (2014) avers that the night masquerade rarely appears, but when it does, it indicates that a sense of sanity is about to be restored amongst the unruly. As the king of the night, the night masquerade is venerated and feared; yet in the course of its tour through the night, it accords honour to who it is due: it honours the deities of the communities, and pays homage to both the

respectable dead and the living. In honouring the living, the dead and the deities, however, it also descends heavily on the randy members of the community and, through various forms of penalties, shows its disgust and zero-tolerance for abominations (p. 46).

Masquerades stabilise the socio-cultural structure and traditions in Idomaland. They play mediatory roles among inhabitants in Idoma society. They are also saddled with the responsibility of making final decisions on communal affairs. Akubor (2016) notes that "in most African societies, masquerades are associated with ancestors, goodwill and governance. They defend and safeguard societies and also prevent all potent threats to their existence and that of related institutions" (p. 33). To this end, adherents of the aforementioned masquerades believe in their (masquerade) potency. The demand of various groups and organisations brought about the various brands of masquerades to meet up with aspirations of the groups, and the functions intended for the masquerade to perform in the community. Masquerades in Idoma culture are known for their secrecy. In fact, Okpeh and Ochefu (2013) claim that the concept of secret society may have evolved among the Idoma out of the continuous search for ways by which the efforts of the Ojila and the various social and political institutions could be supplemented and perfected in the overall interest of society. The secret societies were secret to the extent that they were limited to official members alone and exclusively to adult males of the community. Among their many functions was ensuring that members of the community conformed to the norms and values of the society (p. 34).

The introduction of various brands of masquerades also met the spiritual and social aspiration of the people, thereby, helping them to give meaning and understand to their cosmology from their own acuity. The masquerade forces, merged with people gave the community the understanding that there is another sacred power which restricts us from doing as we wished. Masquerading is also the use of literature and art as a way of conquering and transmitting our weaknesses into strength. It is the ability to imitate life, capture the intricacies and complexities of life . . . this spirituality reflects in his reverence of the masquerades and other forms of societal checks and balances (Ugwueze, 2011, p. 57). The assertion on social checks and balances made by Ugwueze, brings to the fore, the multi-functionalities of masquerades and masquerade performances in Idoma land and in other African societies. Masquerades also make

people in the community aware of the existence of the plane of existence. It makes man conscious of the existence of his ancestors. This is why all masquerades are never underrated, and membership is usually within an organisation with each masquerade serving its own purpose. Asigbo (2013) posits that:

To the African, masking is a serious engagement that requires not only mental and physical involvement but also, spiritual fortification. This is because ancestral masks or spirit manifest are not mere human beings but manifestation from the spirit realm of ancestors and other disembodied beings seeking communion with mortals. (p. 3)

Masquerades fortify adherents, worshippers and participants in the performance process, from external and diabolical attacks. The communion between the living and the dead in the process further gives the adherents and the co-performers, the assurance of such fortification. The *Oyise Ohwe* masquerade performance in Ohwe town in Isokoland in Delta State is a paradigm of this position. During the masquerade festival, which is celebrated once every five years, adherents of the masquerade living in various parts of the world converge on Ohwe to participate in the performance. Their participation does not only strengthen their belief in *Oyise's* (the masquerade) being prepared to ward off evil or impending doom from their path, it is also a proof to *Oyise* that they (the adherents) believe in his potency. The sight of the masquerade further strengthens their belief in it. The costumes and mask makes it larger than life. Hence, Morohunfola (1970) articulates that a masquerade is "considered as a supernatural inquisitor" (p. 94). It is imperative to note that the existence of masquerades is predicated upon the mask they wear. Although, Ododo (2015) in his appropriation of the concept of *Facekuerade Theatre*, which provides a framework for a maskless masquerade, discards the element of mask, there is no doubt that masquerades are revered and believed to be potent with the mask they possess.

In Idoma culture, some masquerades emerge into the performance arena in pairs of a male and female. However, "men always perform the masquerade, while female characters are . . . portrayed" (Spring, 2009, p. 26). In other words, while the male which is the principal masquerade performs, the female character

is merely symbolic. This brings to the fore the masquerade of Abeokuta people in Yorùbá culture in which it is believed that “Gèlèdé masks represent Yorùbá women, but are actually danced by men who dress like women and employ movements that mimic feminine attributes” (Scruggs & Fellow, 2011, p. 1). To this end, the Greek theatre tradition, the Roman theatre culture and the Elizabethan theatre where female roles were performed by male characters also hold sway in the traditional masquerade performance art. It could be remembered according to Shapiro (1994) that, “acting was an all-male activity in ancient Greece and Rome and the same was true in medieval Europe” (p. 31). At that period, the great women characters which include *Clytemnestra* in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*, *Jocasta* in Sophocles’s *King Oedipus*, the eponymous character of *Medea* in Euripides’ *Medea*, *Juliet* in William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, *Reagan* and *Cordelia* in *King Lear* and the all powerful character of *Lady Macbeth* in *Macbeth*, were played by male actors in female toga and garbs. Levine (1994) agrees that the “theatre effeminized the boy actors who played women’s parts by dressing them in women’s costumes was the hallmark of renaissance” (p. 1). These young actors are virtuously skillful and highly trained to bring out the best of the female characteristics.

According to Lawal (1996), women cannot be associated with Gèlèdé masking, “because of its male association; can metaphysically interfere with the innate reproductive powers of a woman” (p.79). This fully captures the spiritual potency of masquerades. The actual masquerading is completely men’s affairs which is also identical to the Igbo people who have a contemporary maiden spirit masquerades called *Adanma* which, according to Ezeliora (2014), is, “literally translated respectively as ‘the princess or beautiful daughter’ and ‘the lady/queen of dance’” (p. 46). They are costumed in female attire with female nuances but “generally, women and girls were excluded from participating in masquerading in Igbo society. “The masquerade and masquerading are exclusively men’s affair” (Chukwu, 2016, p. 64). Masquerading among women is rare in Nigeria and much of Africa. They are, however, practised in places such as the Sande Society of the Mende people in Sierra Leone, which is responsible for teaching young girls the skills and knowledge to become a woman. Kleiner (2013) acknowledges that, “the Mende and neighbouring peoples of Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea are

distinctive in Africa because the women perform masquerades. The masks and costumes they wear conceal the women’s bodies from the audience attending their performances” (p.75).

Joyce (2004) claims that female masquerading can also be found among the women of Ejagham society of Cross River, Nigeria who, “have two different types of women’s masquerades; *Ekpa* masquerades reveal the dancer’s identity, and *Agot* masquerades conceal it” (p.487). These rare situations are, however, very different from the Idoma culture, where masquerade and masquerading are exclusively men’s affairs. Masquerade beliefs are enveloped in myth; having only male initiates and most times members of the community understand the mysteries behind it. Women are generally kept away from the affairs of masquerade as referred to in the Idoma culture as a terrain exclusively for men. As stated above, masquerading in most African culture is chiefly a male-dominated sphere. No matter the level of women masking forms that may exist in a culture, the number of the male masquerades within that culture still outnumbers, supersedes and are used as the criteria to set the governing laws for the generality of the people and society they live in. In Idoma culture the prominence, dominance and superiority of the only male masquerades like in most cultures in Africa, is unrivalled and accepted by the people as the final societal ethos of the customary and norms.

## Conclusion

Among other finds, this article reveals that the masquerade organisation serves as the intermediary between humans and spirits to bring a blend and harmony in their relationship. It establishes cultural identity as well as attracts admiration for the Idoma culture and tradition. Furthermore, it serves as fulfillment of social obligations and brings colourful and aesthetic appeals with genuine African style and artistic creativity of the craftsmen behind the making of the masquerade. It is also discovered that masquerades are used as spirits to help create laws, control and checkmate evil forces in the community. Irrefutably, masquerades in Idoma culture do not only earn their respect and attraction from verbal narratives, they also have other appeals such as their nuances in performance, beats of drum-rhythms of various repertoires from the drummers and the singers who produce the music for

entertainment. The study recommends that the Councils for Arts and Culture in all the states of the Nigerian federation should make masquerade societies that are in their localities part of their troupes. This will go a long way in helping to maintain the authenticity of masquerade performance. This will add value to the economic progress of the community and become socially relevant in the tourism industry. Doing this will discourage the description of masquerade performances as primitive, barbaric and devilish.

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**Abstract**

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