



Performance Contexts of Rituals in Transition: The Ikeji Masquerade Festival of Arondizuogu as Paradigm

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Abstract: *This study is predicated on Harrison's (1913) view that "when ritual wanes, art waxes". It is therefore an attempt to record and study the Ikeji Masquerade Festival of Arondizuogu of South East Nigeria in order to discover the relationship between tradition and talent as well as how a communal ritual performance can transmute into individual aesthetics and mercantile art. With the negative connotations of the word "Ritual" among the unenlightened, it has become pertinent to conduct a study into ritual performances so as to dispel these untoward cleavages as well as tap into the healing and expiating values of ritual. Ritual performances may therefore provide answers to the ongoing investigations into "theatre as therapy" which the French man Antonin Artaud had tried to postulate in his "Theatre of Cruelty". As is obvious, the frontiers of performance studies get expanded by the day; hence there is need to evolve a new aesthetics distinct from the orthodox critical canon of looking at ritual performances as enactments that must tell recognizable stories. As usual, performance contexts most times, mediate on the content hence the ritual content of these performances in transition get watered down.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This study is motivated by a need to explore the creative potentials of ritual activities caught up on the maze of a society in transition. It is equally a revalidation of Richard Schechner's (2002) contention that rituals and folk performances are not just deposit vaults for cultural heritages but could be capable of engendering fresh insights into a people's way of life as well as their responses to changing times. Schechner's projections on the future of ritual will find support in the same theoretical postulations which this work will be advancing. Cynics have always been of the view that everything retrogresses to bizarre entropy in the hands of man and that empathic practices which our forebears engaged in for a symbiotic relationship with nature are either becoming perverted or have since died. It is however, gratifying to note that with the ascendancy of performance studies, areas hitherto excluded by orthodox theatre studies are now being recognized and studied for their intrinsic contributions to the edification of man.



In theorizing ritual and folk performances, folklorists seem to be united in the opinion that “when ritual wanes, art waxes”. (Harrison; 1913). It is against this background that I shall be investigating the Ikeji masquerade festival of the Arondizuogu people of South East Nigeria with a view to recording and analyzing its transition from ritual to popular art and entertainment and from there to mercantile art. As ritual, it fulfilled needs which go beyond the mundane such as asserting social control, spiritual alignment of the world of the living to that of the dead etc. As popular art and entertainment, it not only sets the moral tenor for a society that is fast losing its values but also serves as a medium for the liberation of pent up libidinous energies and titillation of mundane feelings even as it fulfills the all important task of putting food on the table of its peddlers.

The ritual origins of theatre and indeed all performative arts have never been in doubt. Thus, Mowry-Roberts (1974:7-8), upholds that;

Nature-rites...seem everywhere of primal importance in primitive societies. The extension of the spirit world and its inclusion of the great and wise of past times, led to the development of myth cults. The change from nature-rite to myth cult had significant reverberations for the future development of theatre, for it led to the portrayal by certain players of the individual king, hero, or god celebrated in the myth, and *impersonation*- the basic function of the actor as distinct from the ritual priest – was born.

Indeed, so enamored was early man with issues of ritual that elaborate performances evolved all in the bid to maintain links with the super mundane world. In doing this, the African world is construed as a fluid entity with both the gods and the living constantly struggling to make contact with each other. The gods are thus said;

to be doomed, just like their human counterparts, to a terrible, inconsolable nostalgia and incompleteness, because of which they must undergo seasonal journeys of renewal. These journeys...consist in the gods leaving their exalted places in “heaven” and travelling down, through the perilous gulf of transition ...in order to effect a reconciliation, even if momentary, with man. (Osofisan, 2008:11)

Elaborate ritual performances are designed; all aimed at celebrating these symbolic reunions of man with the great essence and in so doing, fortify man spiritually to face the daily challenges of life. These performances usually come in the form of;

...mingling of speech with song, music and dance; of magic and fantasy; of the realistic as well as the ritualistic; of the surreal with the supernatural and the mundane... (Osofisan, 2008:5).

Since ritual has always been seen as a phenomenon with fixed form, any deviation from the communally accepted pattern of doings things was thought to portend danger for the entire community. Indeed, so palpable was the terror of contravening a communal ritual that it took iconoclasts to undertake such ventures – sometimes, with disastrous consequences and at other times, it engenders legacies which succeeding generations have come to treasure and to enjoy. Ezeulu’s travails in Achebe’s *Arrow of God* are a clear indication of the dangers that could confront one who wittingly or unwittingly transgresses communal rituals.

On the other hand, Queen Idia of Benin; the first Iya Oba, whose son, Oba Ewuare, dared to break the ritual of having Queen Mothers executed before the ascension of their sons to the



throne of Benin and of course, Thespis, who contravened the conventionally accepted method of worshipping Dionysius readily come to mind as transgressors whose acts of transgression, engendered legacies which succeeding generations have come to enjoy. In the former case, Idia lived to lead the Benin people to a victorious battle against the Igala; helped to quell domestic tensions besetting Benin kingdom at that time as well as secure a place for succeeding generations of Queen Mothers. As a reward for her services to the Benin kingdom, The Idia mask head, which became the symbol for Festac '77, was carved to honour her. Thespis' action on the other hand, gave birth to what became known as Greek drama and a major source of influence on succeeding generations of theatre traditions. Of course, actors everywhere have since come to be known as Thespians.

Rituals/Masquerade Performances In Transition

The phenomenon of masquerades or spirit manifests or for that matter, masked spirits has been discussed variously by scholars of Igbo extraction like Ossie Enekwe, Ugonna Nnabuenyi, Chuks Okoye and even a woman like Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh among others. Masking as an Igbo pastime has both spiritual and secular functions. Issues of cleansing the land and execution of communal judgments on transgressors – especially where the very influential are involved, are usually carried out by spirit manifests. This is because, spirit manifests as embodiments of the ancestors are beyond the corrupting influences of mundane man; hence they speak with the authority of the gods and are in every sense of the word, intermediaries between the living and the dead. Their brand of speech is sublime and may not be easily understood by the uninitiated and has been described as “Poetry of the living dead” by Romanus Egudu (1992).

Masking traditions in Igbo land are variegated depending on the locality. Thus, there are secular as well as ritual masked spirits. There are daylight as well as night spirit manifests. Masquerade types and forms are most often determined by their functions in the people's social and spiritual space. Thus, from the Imoka of Awka people; Omaliko of the Abatete people; Afiaolu of the Nnewi – Ozubulu axis; Nzurani of the Anam people to Ikeji of the Arondizuogu and even the Eyo of Lagos, the phenomenon of masking has continued to play functional roles in the lives of the different communities. Donning ancestral mask is however, not an all comers' affair. In some communities, initiation into the masquerade cult are organized along age grade lines, while still in certain others, it is selective – depending mostly on the financial wherewithal of would- be initiates. In rare cases, especially, for spirit manifests that perform cleansing functions, special dispensations are granted to certain individuals who may possess the requisite spiritual fortifications for specific purposes. Even with initiates, the awe and dread of the knowledge that they are interacting with beings that are on a higher plane is a constant reminder that restrains man's excesses. According to Onuora Nzekwu:

The truth is that the manifestation of ancestral spirits (sic) is a vital facet of ancestor worship. Traditionally, like everything else of importance, masquerading and its secrets are the prerogatives of the men- only initiates at that... Apart from this fear, there is the desire to avert the wrath of these spirits whose condescension to visit mankind in the form of Masquerades is a great honour which must not be abused. They are mindful of the fact that ancestral spirits are superior to mere mortals and constitute an unusual phenomenon when they assume physical forms. (1981; 123)



The fact is that most masquerades have a story or myth sustaining their existence. Myths or stories that engender masquerade performances most times account for the form and content as well as time of performance for such a spirit manifest. Since masquerades are believed to embody both the spiritual and mundane worlds, it is not surprising that a lot of mystery surrounds the phenomenon. Depending on one's orientation, stories on the origin of specific spirit manifests may be seen as palpably true or manifestly seen as myth or fable. Masquerade costumes are made from a variety of materials and "...are associated with spiritual elements ... represent images of deities or sometimes even dead relatives". (Widjaja: www.igboguide.org).

In the attempt to maintain societal harmony, Igbo forebears invented the masquerade cult. As an agent of the state in charge of both judicial and legislative functions, masquerades are regarded as impartial umpires since not being humans; they may not be influenced by material needs. Supporting this, Widjaja (2007) says;

In the past, masquerades were regarded as the means for maintaining peace and order and were primarily used as law enforcement agents. The whole village would come out for the ceremony of the colourful masquerades. While entertaining through dances and exhibiting extra-human feats, the masquerades would walk up to certain individuals and loudly expose bad habits, crimes or misbehavior of that person.

Social masquerades appear during Christian festivals of Christmas, Easter and European New year celebrations. Social masquerades are mainly avenues for release of pent up libidinous energies, relaxation and recreation by the young. Being an essentially social affair, women may participate either as spectators or indeed as back-up singers. Indeed, the socialization of masquerades is a pointer to the fact that the Igbo were perhaps the first to take masking out of its ritual environment hence the myth behind such masquerades have since been lost in the memory of man. It is equally a pointer to the fact that rituals as indeed most human endeavors evolve.

For ritual masquerades, their appearances are strictly regimented and controlled to avoid unnecessary contacts with profane eyes as well as conform to specific traditional festivals like New Yam, burial of titled men or annual supplications to specific guardian deities. Exceptions to this schedule may only happen in cases where laws have been transgressed hence ritual masquerades will be summoned to appear and cleanse the land of taboo. In such cases, the audience will usually constitute only titled elders and strong medicine men. This is why masquerades are regarded as symbols and or manifestations of the living dead. Masquerades like Ijele of the Omambala people for instance, personify the entire Igbo cosmos and worldview in that in its design, everything about the Igbo world is encompassed. The Ijele design remains a most dynamic expression of Igbo life hence symbols from contemporary Igbo life are encapsulated in the Ijele mask head even as symbolizations from their flora and fauna are equally taken care of. This is why one will not be far off the mark to assert that the concept of bricolage comes into play in designing the Ijele mask head. In the world of Fine Arts, bricolage will mean an improvisation with materials readily available to one in the process of creating a work of art.

Most ritual and masquerade performances in Africa have myths or legends that engendered them. For the Ikeji, the story has it that, descendants of Aro in honor of their god Ibinumu-



Ukpabi, notoriously known among Europeans as Long Juju instituted the ceremony as a celebration of new yam. According to Dike;

The Aro people, an amalgam of several Igbo, Ibibio, and Cross River ethnic elements, first came together in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century to fight a war against a group of Ibibio people. They relied on the power of their famed oracle *ibiniukpabi*, to build a trading network throughout the region. (1990:118-123).

Etymologically, Ikeji means Ike ji isi- fastening the yam tendrils, or removing the yam tendrils in preparation for storage hence Aros of the spiritual homeland of Arochukwu celebrate Ikeji in the month of September. Ikeji in the spiritual homeland of Arochukwu is a complex celebration that lasts for 21 days and does not involve masking. Ikeji festival is celebrated in all Igbo communities that claim Aro ancestry. This study however, is based on the Ikeji of Arondizuogu. That of Arondizuogu is usually held between the months of March and April depending on the calculation of the Igbo lunar calendar by the elders. Etymologically therefore, that of Arondizuogu could mean fastening the yam tendrils. Indeed, the grand finale of the 2009 Ikeji was celebrated on the 18th of April. The presence of masquerades in the Ikeji of Arondizuogu is clearly an influence that can be attributed to contact with neighbors of Anambra River Basin extraction who masking is markedly in their tradition but who settled among the Aro of Ndizuogu. The Igbo of Anambra River Basin clearly learnt the art of masking from their neighbors of the Benue Basin most notably the Igala. The Aro sub group of Igbo land holds the record of being one of the most itinerant and widely travelled among the people of the Igbo nation.

Arondizuogu is made of 28 communities or villages and is today located on the Western fringes of Imo State in Ideato North, Okigwe and Onuimo Local Government Areas. As a prelude to the Ikeji, a general environmental sanitation is held about a week to the festival to get the community ready to receive visitors. The festival starts on an Eke day known as Eke Odu and is usually a day set aside for initiation of qualified male folks into the masquerade cult. The second day is Orié Egbugbu and is devoted to thanksgiving and propitiations to the various gods, deities and ancestors. The third day – Afor, marks the first day of masquerade outings which normally happens at Afor Ndiawa public square. Masquerades patrol the major streets, entertaining. The climax is usually on the fourth day, Nkwo and the venue is Nkwo Acha public square. This day witnesses the greatest variety of masquerades and the streets are rendered impassable because of the presence of these spirit manifests.

Everybody engages in endless revelry and mirth even as various masquerade groups sing songs of exultation in honour of the many deities. Magic displays and flogging competitions are the order of the day. In clear refutation of scientific laws for instance, a young celebrant carries water in a basket and to defy all logic, allows a little amount to seep through at his whims and caprices. Two others, in defiance of the Igbo saying that, *oti okpo ana etiro isi akwu*, the boxer cannot punch a palm head; do just that by throwing a palm head about and catching it with bare hands even as they kick it about. Elsewhere, young men catch their fun by magically immobilizing opponents. All these while, the star prize, a goat, stands tethered to a pole; waiting for the spiritually tonsured to dare the perilous task of untying it and walking away with it.



Ikeji masquerade festival is patterned to be a magic contest among various masquerades/masquerade groups. Usually, each masquerade will have singers and acolytes to boost its morale and help out in the onerous task of claiming the star prize, which requires the greatest spiritual fortification. The songs which the acolytes sing usually contain the moral of each unfolding situation. However, because ritual is always seen by the unenlightened as something that connotes evil and heathenism, a lot of violence is being done to the survival of this folk performance as participants are now shy of being seen as indulging in something evil. This attitude, and of course, the changing times have mediated not only on the performance context but also on its content as well as style. Since the two major foreign religions of Christianity and Islam have always viewed acts and festivals not originated by them as evil and primitive, it is not surprising that this folk pastime is suffering untold violence and would have indeed gone into extinction if not for the efforts of one Chief Perry-Como Okoye who is doggedly committed to reviving this dying art. This transmutation from ritual and popular art to individual aesthetics as witnessed in the changes which Okoye made will form a pivot around which this study shall revolve. Even though, the people have reclaimed their art, Ikeji Arondizuogu of today cannot be complete without the presence of Chief Perry-Como Okoye – the Makajaka 1 of Igbo land and the cultural Prime Minister of Arondizuogu.

Ikeji in Today's Arondizuogu

Traditional festivals everywhere in Africa are transmuting into carnivals. This is as it should be since Ministries of culture in most countries are working towards turning ritual performances into revenue earners. Commenting on the primal place of festivals in African culture, Ogunba says;

...the festival is the prime artistic institution of traditional Africa, for the festival is the only institution which has the framework which can coordinate virtually all the art forms of a community... each tends to have a story or myth to perform and each makes use of its own peculiar style in the dramatic realization of the story. (1978:5).

Ikeji as cultural Tourism has undoubtedly benefited from interaction with surrounding cultures and has parallels in the Imoka of Awka people, Nzurani of the Anam people, Osun Osogbo of the Yoruba and the Eyo masquerade carnival of Lagos. In almost all the above instances, the myths or stories that engendered the ceremonies have become almost lost to most of the people that partake in the festival. People are thus more interested in the performances that take place in these festivals and see such festivals as avenues for release of pent up libidinous energies as well as relaxation.

Today's Ikeji Festival has lost most of the ritual undertones that give it awe. Presently, it has become more of a cultural carnival annually planned under the auspices of the Arondizuogu Progressive Union (APU) worldwide. Yearly, the APU would constitute carnival committees under the Chairmanship of a distinguished son of the soil. Their task would normally include, handling issues of security which will involve liaising with the relevant security agencies; raising funds; ensuring that participants play by the rules- which includes assigning numbers to all masquerades so that identification of defaulters will be easy; general programming of the events as well as deciding worthy sons and daughters to be honored. The organizing



committee also seeks sponsorship by involving corporate sponsors like Glo, MTN, Multi-national companies and so on. Indeed, as a follow up to its attempts to globalize Ikeji, the APU, Abuja branch on the 20th of June, 2010, unveiled what can be described as the Ikeji Mascot. In attendance that day were Nigeria's Ministers of Culture and Tourism as well as that of Information and Communication. Pivotal to that day's proceedings were discussions on how to make Ikeji, not only a UNESCO heritage but also a serious foreign exchange earner for Nigeria. The case of Ikeji is a pointer to the fact that rituals have the potential, not only to lose the belief which hitherto sustain and mystify them but can transmute to economic pillars for its practitioners and other ancillary artists who partake in the repackaging of such a festival for mass dissemination.

Changes in the practice of Ikeji can best be described as bricolage. Bricolage is a term that is increasingly becoming popular in performance studies and is used to denote creative changes which cultural practices undergo as a result of social contact with other cultural sub groups. Thus, certain practices, which hitherto were alien to the Ikeji festival, like raffle draws, corporate sponsorships and even the security measure of numbering masquerades to checkmate rogue maskers are clearly influences from without. Today, one observes that Ikeji is not only an international tourism event, but is equally becoming a cultural export commodity hence it is even celebrated in far away United States of America. Ikeji in America has clearly been influenced by carnival practices in the USA even as its form and content are mediated by economic considerations since most indigenes of Arondizuogu in the USA have to contend with economic realities such that even the time allocated to the festival is shortened and masquerade costumes altered to meet the needs of a new socio-cultural climate. The present form of Ikeji can clearly be attributed to creative adaptation/adoption of surrounding cultures hence our classification of that effort as bricolage or improvisation. It is thus not uncommon to see Ikeji Masquerades in the USA wearing canvas and other forms of footwear in place of stockings. This would ordinarily have been considered taboo in orthodox Igbo Masquerade costuming. (See Plates 1, 2, 3, 4,5,6, 7, 8 & 9).

This is the only way one can explain away the influence of the Obama phenomenon in virtually all facets of Nigerian and indeed, African life¹. An African saying has it that "success has many relatives while failure is an orphan". Perhaps this is why the modern day legend known as Obama is engendering clones in virtually all nooks and crannies of Africa. The Nasarawa State Cultural Troupe for instance, has in its repertoire, a dance known as Obama dance even as many children born immediately after the Obama victory at the polls are named Obama. This would equally explain away the emergence of the Obama masquerade in the Ikeji Festival.

As cultural Tourism, Ikeji has benefitted a lot from the electronic media. People who miss the Ikeji can now easily buy a DVD or VCD of the event and witness all that happened. Indeed, the video repackaging of Ikeji, because it has benefitted from the craft of editing can be said to have captured more of the complexity of the festival than an individual would ordinarily have witnessed. This again, seems to be a reaffirmation of the Igbo saying that *anoro na ofu ebe ekili muo* or that *nkweghalu k'oji ele nwa nkpi* – you do not watch masquerades from one location and that it is by moving from place to place that one sells a he goat. Undoubtedly, because the video technology can pull images and events from various angles and repackage them in a single unit, it becomes a veritable tool for giving various points of view of an event hence it becomes an indispensable research material for one wishing to investigate such an



event. It equally blurs the dividing line among the different media of communication like performance, video technology and orality.

The transition from communal ritual to art and solo performance and back again to communal performance, imposes on one the duty to study the relationship between Tradition and Talent. It is not in doubt that Ikeji started as a religious obligation to *Ibinumu Ukpabi* or the long Juju; it is equally not in doubt that at a stage, due to the advent of foreign religions, it started losing some of its flavor; it is also true that a young man named Mezue Okoye was said to have been spirited away by supernatural forces sometime in the '50s. That young man was to reappear later as a renowned traditional healer and cultural ambassador. That young man is Chief Perry Como Okoye, who revived the Ikeji festival and gave it back to Arondizuogu. It is my contention that real creativity as postulated by Gregory Gizelis (1973) can be achieved by a folk performer working with folk materials and idioms. Of a truth, contemporary Ikeji festival has gained a lot from the personality of Chief Perry-Como Okoye. Commenting on the extent to which private vision can shape group aesthetics, Irele (1981:196) says that;

The great fortune ...is that the world views which shape the experience of the individual in the traditional society are still very much alive and continue to provide a comprehensive frame of reference for communal life. The African gods continue to function within the realm of the inner consciousness of the majority of our societies, and the symbols attached to them continue to inform in an active way the communal sensibility.

This is why as acknowledgement for his contributions to Ikeji of today organizing committees of the yearly festival always include the honoring of Chief Okoye² with a ram as part of the Ikeji program. His peculiar life style of being not only a native doctor but also an accomplished musician marks him out as a living legend. It is thus not surprising that various songs and even movies on the stable of Nigeria's Nollywood celebrate Chief Okoye as a phenomenon that is akin to a demi-god. Chief Okoye too as a cultural ambassador and performer per excellence not only practices real creativity by appropriating traditional idioms into something uniquely individual but also inspires real creativity in fellow artists who see his personality as a drawing pool for their own individual creations.

Creativity here therefore lies in how the individual has been able to turn group aesthetics into private vision and retransmits same to society. Thus, most of Chief Okoye's songs which were composed for the different Ikeji festivals as well as the many others composed around his escapades engender speech and social fads which continue to contribute to the growth of the Igbo language and culture. His style of rendition, tonal inflections, spontaneity, chants, and incantations as well as the use of tongue twisters are apposite tools for the renewal of culture and enriching of language.

Star attractions during the Ikeji are masquerades like *Tabansi Udene*, *Obama*, *Ewu n'eye n'ukwa*, *Obata Obie*, *Eddie Okonta*, *Odinga Izuogu*, *Okpoma Ozara*, *Okoro ka Nze*, *Edi Ngene*, *Okeke Idiagbo* and *Atu ndeli* among others. Names of the masquerades sometimes are indicators of the peculiar characteristics of the respective spirit manifests. Overall, the atmosphere is convivial as even masked spirits that have been "spiritually defeated" pick themselves up and join the fun. In all, the Igbo penchant for fair play is observed (Asigbo, 2009; 80) and people are forbidden from giving mortal injuries to opponents. To ensure strict



compliance, masquerades are given special numbers so that all a stranger need to do is to say that masquerade number so, did this to me.

In summation, one can say that Ikeji Masquerade Festival possesses unrivalled potentials for advancing Nigeria's drive towards expanding her revenue base using Cultural Tourism as a pivot. Not only is Ikeji an ancient ritual that has adapted to changing times hence it is now an entirely secular event, it has evolved to become a rallying point for Aro sons and daughters in the Diasporas. Since Ikeji is already a rallying point for the Aros, our contention is that it can fulfill such needs in the Nigerian cultural life. Government is therefore encouraged to list Ikeji festival among the officially recognized ones by the federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism even as attempts should be made to get UNESCO interested in the Festival.

Notes

1. Even the recent (2010) edition of Maltina Dance All held in the month of September had The Okoroafor family drawing strength from the Obama phenomenon by spotting a T-shirt with Obama's picture and the legend "Yes we can" on it.
2. Perry Como Okoye died on the 16th of February, 2017 at the age of 69.

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PLATE 1. OBAMA MASQUERADE



PLATE 2. REVELLERS AT IKEJI FESTIVAL



PLATE 3. REVELLERS AT THE IKEJI FESTIVAL



PLATE 4. REVELLERS AT THE IKEJI FESTIVAL



PLATE 5. CHIEF PERRY –COMO OKOYE LIBATING TO THE GODS



PLATE 6. EDDIE OKONTA



PLATE 7. EKWENSU MASQUERADE (DEVIL)



PLATE 8. OGBOMMA IZUOGU



PLATE 9. YOUNG MEN PLAYING WITH PALMHEAD