



Masquerades in African Philosophy and The Issue of Nation Building

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ABSTRACT *Masquerades occupy a significant place in the traditional life and histories of most African societies. They are the ancestral spirits on a visit to mankind, and thus a manifestation at the sensory level of some type of spirit, to which must be accorded respect, awe and unquantifiable obedience. While this piece studies the place of masquerades with particular reference to the Igbo-African ontology, it raises questions as regards its contribution to nation building. It argues that masquerades have contributed heavily to nation building, especially in traditional Igbo-African societies and beyond, especially in the settlement of disputes, ensuring order in societies, providing entertainment an bridging the gap between the visible and invisible worlds which creates the balance needed by all societies.*

Introduction

The African universe is made up of myriad of spirits. Death is not the final end of man. After death, the soul nkpuobi goes back to Chukwu. The after-life for the African is a life of continuing relationship with the living dead. Those who lived good lives and died at ripe old age, receiving the appropriate funeral rites, in relation to their status, go to the spirit-land (Ala-mmuo) where they continue to live until they reincarnate. On the other hand, those who lived bad lives and died bad death, like in accidents or before one reaches a ripe old age, are sent to an intermediate state, between the spirit-land and the land of the living where they live frustrated. Those who have lived good lives or kept the laws and taboos of land and were followed with the appropriate burial and funeral rites are the ancestors. Metuh (1991), argues that they are under the presidency of the Ala deity. They are the guidance of morality and the owners of the soil. They occupy a very significant place in Igbo life and religion. Uchendu (1965) avers that ancestors are the invisible segment of the Igbo-African lineage. They are honoured by society, and this honour given to them is anchored on the principle of reciprocity and philosophy of reincarnation: having been honoured, they are expected to reincarnate and do for the living members what they did for them. And if a person wants to know who has reincarnated, Arinze (1970) wrote that "he goes to a fortune-teller and names all the ancestors. The fortune-teller chooses from the list the name of the returned one" (p. 21); there are also times when the ancestor reincarnating passes the message to a family member through dreams.

The idea of masquerades in Igbo-African ontology is drawn from the understanding of ancestors among the African people. One of the ways through which they visit human beings, that is, the living is through masquerades. Although this piece studies the meaning and nature of masquerades, it focuses on the contribution of masquerades to nation building.

Masquerades in African Ontology

Very significant in the understanding of masquerades is the idea that they are symbols. They are symbols of the dead forefathers of the visible world. Fairchild (1965) understood symbols as,

...that which stands for something else. Particularly, a relatively concrete, explicit representation of a more generalized, diffuse, intangible object or group of objects. A very large part of social processes is carried on by the use of symbols. Such as words, money, certificates and pictures. A true symbol excites reactions similar to, though perhaps not quite as intense as those created by the original object. (p. 314).

Ejizu (1986), agreeing with Fairchild, defined a symbol as "a thing recognized as normally typifying, representing, recalling something of a great importance. It implies an analogous association with what it stands for" (p. 1). Explaining further, Turner (1968) added that symbols could be in the form of "objects, activities, events, gestures and special units in a ritual situation" (p. 19). They are symbols created by a people and thus are what they people who own them think they are. This further establishes the nexus between symbols and cosmology. Thus masquerades are not the dead forefathers but visible symbols of the invisible forefathers. Nzekwu (1981) describes masquerades as ancestral spirits on a visit to mankind. Onyeneke (1987) with the same perspective pictured masquerades as the "manifestation at a sensory level of some type of spirit-mmuo. It is a visible spirit to which must be accorded respect, awe and unquantifiable obedience" (p. 62). According to Ezechi (2011), they manifest among the people periodically, sometimes for several days, weeks or months, pending on the type of masquerade. During their appearance he wrote that, "Masquerades entertain people through forms of display, dancing, drama and athletics. They may also be involved in sprinting with the youth especially for recreational purposes or they come to grace funeral occasions" (p. 32).

Characteristics of Igbo-African Masquerades

The following can be understood as the basic characteristics of masquerades in Igbo-African ontology.

1. They possess an awe inspiring attribute. He wrote that "The 'anonymous' element as well as the often dreadful appearance of masks generates an aura and a cretate fear which makes the masquerade stir the crowd at a mere mention of it, among fretting people like women and children" (p. 32).

2. They possess enormous supernatural and magical powers. This is as a result of their link with the spirit world. Thus Onyehalu (1987) attributes ubiquity, foreknowledge, invulnerability and the ability to carry water in a porous basket to them.
3. In their dealings, they represent the community's will. They do not do or act just the way they want or order people around. When they enforce obedience and discipline, they do that because that is what the community wants done. They represent the will of the community.
4. Masquerades thrive on secrecy. Information regarding a particular masquerade is made known only to initiated members. And when a member divulges the secret of a masquerade, the consequences are usually very horrible, such that it is very difficult if not impossible to get someone who divulges such a secret.
5. A person becomes a member of a masquerade cult through initiation, usually between 5 to 20 years when it is believed that one should be able to keep secrets. According to Enekwe (1981), initiation into the masquerade cult forms part of the puberty rites, graduating the candidate into adulthood. After they initiation, they become an age grade, subject to communal labour, may participate in rituals and associate with elders.
6. Igbo masquerade is an exclusive society or cult for men. This agrees with the Igbo traditional structure which places a lot of value on the men. This does not mean that masquerades are anti-feminine. Many masquerades dress like women, displaying women features and prefer being in the company of women. It is a communal thing and everyone has a role to play. In fact, in some Igbo societies, aged women are admitted into the cult of masquerades because it is considered inappropriate to frighten them. The general reason why women are excluded is because they are considered incapable of tolerating hazards and keeping secrets.

The Origin of Masquerades in Igbo-African ontology

A cursory glance at the development of studies on Igbo-African masquerades, from the colonial era to the present, reveals that there are two hypotheses on the origin of masquerades: the external origin hypothesis and the internal origin hypothesis. The external origin hypothesis was formulated and maintained basically by scholars who were of the colonial times; this perspective is evident in the works of Basden (1966), Jeffery (1949) and Talbot (1926). Their perspective, according to Madu (2004) cannot be divorced from the colonial thinking about the Igbos as those who are benighted and have no history. Their perspective is that the Masquerade Mmanwu society of Ika and Onitsha originated from Igara.

Contrary to the outside origin hypothesis Igbo scholars have argued, using the Nri civilization as a pivot point, that Igbo masquerades began from Igbo land. Arguing against the outside origin hypothesis Onyeneke (1987) wrote that "The theory of origin of Igbo masquerades places the institution deeply in the Nri cultural development, an autonomous and indigenous Igbo civilization which came to be diffused outwards in all directions" (p. 47).

Expanding the possibilities of an inside origin hypothesis, many Igbo scholars have made reference to the popular Igbo saying that Chukwu sin a mmanwu silli owelle bia (Chukwu said that the masquerade came from the

backyard). Madu (2004), going beyond the two proposals, narrated a myth of the origin of masquerades from among the Igbos. He wrote,

The story has it that a certain man allocated his lands to his many children. To his youngest who was his favourite and from another wife, he gave an additional plot of land over and above those of his other brothers to compensate him for his very young age.

When their father died, they did all the funeral rites accruing to him. After this, all the brothers turned against their youngest brother out of jealousy for the extra kindness of their late father towards him. They plotted to usurp his endowment plot of land.

The boy had to work out a strategy to see that the authority of their late father was made to bear on his late brothers. He recalled a special kind of cloth used to cover his father's body at his funeral, and the same which was used for the effigy. He obtained that type of cloth and made it into a loosed garment to cover him totally. Then he collected crops for planting, a hoe and machete as farm implements, the okuke (the insignia of his father's title) and a cane. With all these, he hid himself in a bush close to the disputed plot of land.

His brothers later came to the disputed plot of land to clear it for cultivation. The boy, now the living image of his father, rushed out to meet them from the bush where he was hiding and repeated in a sonorous voice the land boundaries originally set by their father. The frightened brothers ran away and never tampered with the land again. (pp. 53-54).

Rather than being of external origin, this myth expresses that the masquerade cult was born out of the ingenuity of the Igbo person in response or as a solution to the challenges he faced.

The Nature and Meaning of Nation Building

Ezeanya (1980) observes that nation building is a herculean task whose magnitude only very few realise. The difficulty of this understanding is seen in the fact that some see it as consisting only of technological development and the setting up of all kinds of modern structures, accumulating an almost inexhaustible supply of the most sophisticated and deadly weapons, the ability to defend the frontiers of a nation, a high percentage of mass literacy, control of buoyant economy, and in fact, being in possession of all kinds of material goods which are calculated to make man's life happy here below and guarantee national security by force of arms. He wrote,

The building of a nation ...cannot be achieved by the mere accumulation of material things or the procurement of a life of comfort and ease often only to a limited few. This alone will not make man really happy for the simple reason that man is not mere matter. He has a spiritual part which matter is too base to satisfy. He is a composite of matter and spirit and he has his destiny far beyond the confines of this world. He has an eternal destiny.

Any project of nation building which loses sight of, or ignores the spiritual and material well-being of man taken as a whole, cannot succeed in building a nation in which no other is oppressed. Therefore the work of nation building has both the material and spiritual aspects. (p. 322).

Aristotle had expressed this perspective when he wrote that,

The end of the state is not mere life; it is rather a good quality of life... similarly, it is not the end of the state to provide an alliance of mutual defence against all injury or to ease exchange and promote economic intercourse... but it is the cardinal issue of goodness and badness in the life of the polis which always engages the attention of any state that concerns itself to secure a system of good laws well obeyed. The conclusion which clearly follows, is that any polis which is truly so-called, and is not merely one in name must devote itself to the end of encouraging goodness. Otherwise a political association sinks into mere alliance, which only differs in space from other forms of alliance where the members live at a distance from one another. (pp. 118-119).

In the past, discussions and commentaries on nation building easily tended to be developed by economists who saw it primarily from the perspective of economic growth. In that context, so long as the monetary value of goods and services (Gross Domestic Product) increased yearly, there was nation building. However, from the above understanding, and from the perspective of Onwuliri (2008) it must include a positive change in human wellbeing; an all encompassing enterprise. And in the contention of Nwajiuba (1999), the majority of people must benefit from it. Thus Levi and Havinden (1982) that it must be a long-term improvement in the standard of living, as felt and judged to be by most of the people in the country.

Masquerades and Nation Building

1. Masquerades in African ontology can contribute towards the development of the tourism market. They are capable of attracting people from all over the world to experience the rich culture of Africa. For instance, the Arondizuogu New Yam festival which brings visitors from all over the world to watch Arondizuogu masquerades. According to UNWTO (2004) two million people visited Nigeria and about 3.7 million dollars was generated. If this is well harnessed and adapted for global consumption, it would increase the income of the economy annually. If the government focuses on the developing African symbols, it would further empower the poor masses.
2. Madu (2004) contends that the masquerades re-enact and relive the lives and events of the past in premordialism. They can therefore become a veritable instrument for the preservation of the identity of a nation. And a nation cannot talk about development unless she understands her identity and where she has come from. The masquerade cult preserves this identity and presents it for mapping out the course for nation building. It ensures the continuity of the clan and community's religious history, and the preservation of their worldview.
3. Masquerade cult provides an opportunity for recreation. And since we are talking about nation building which is wholistic, there should be time for leisure. It is an essential element of human biology and psychology. Under the declaration of Universal Human Rights, leisure is considered a human right and reflects the value and character of a nation. It helps the physical and psychological development of individual persons, and what is a nation if the individual persons that make her up are not in good order? Masquerade cult satisfied this necessary human need for the building of the nation.
4. In the past, masquerades helped in building traditional

nations by maintaining peace and order. Achebe (1958) in his classic *Things Fall Apart* presented them as agents of order, social control and adjustment. It was a masquerade that settled the dispute between Uzowulu and his in-laws. Achebe wrote,

The egwugwu had emerged once again from their underground home. They saluted one another and then reappeared on the ilo.

"Umuofia kwenu!" facing the elders and grandees of the clan.

"yaa!" replied the thunderous crowd, then silence descended from the sky and swallowed the noise.

Evil forest began to speak and while he spoke everyone was silent. The eight other egwugwu were as still as statues.

'We have heard both sides of the case' said evil forest. 'Our duty is not to blame this man or praise that, but to settle the dispute'. He turned to Uzowulu's group and allowed a short pause.

'Uzowulu's body, do you know me?'

'How can I know you father? You are beyond our knowledge' Uzowulu replied.

'I am evil forest, I kill a man the day his life is sweetest to him'.

'that is true' replied Uzowulu.

'Go to your in-laws with a pot of wine and beg your wife to return to you. It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman'.

He turned to Odukwe and allowed a brief pause.

'Odukwe's body i greet you' he said.

'My hand is on the ground' replied Odukwe.

'Do you know me?'

'No man can know you' replied Odukwe.

'I am Evil Forest. I am dry meat that fills the mouth, I am fire that burns without faggots. If your in-law brings wine to you, let your sister go with him. I salute you'. He pulled his staff from the hard earth and thrust it back.

"Umuofia kwenu!" he roared and the crowd answered. (pp. 74-75).

Because of the belief that they were ancestors, they were able to settle even the most difficult of disputes. Their words were final because their words were believed to be absolutely impartial. They were the final court of appeal.

Conclusion

This piece has studied the African universe, which it observes is composed of a myriad of spirits, including the ancestors from which the idea of masquerades emerged. Masquerades are understood as ancestral spirits on a visit to mankind. It further studied the origin and characteristics of masquerades to help enhance an understanding of the meaning and nature of masquerades. Focussing on nation building and how masquerades can contribute in this direction, this paper submits that masquerades contribute to boosting the tourism industry of any nation, preserve its identity, enhance recreation, and as it did in building traditional African nations, preserve peace and order.

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