

Mediatizing Masking: Towards a New Performance Tradition in a Pandemic Era

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Abstract: Masking, otherwise known in some linguistic parlance as masquerading has remained an eloquent means of expression in traditional African nay Nigerian societies especially among the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria. There has been, over the years, various modes and means of performing masking according to the traditional codes of the performing cultures or societies. However, at the turn of the 21st Century and the consistent tilt towards globalization and the new media technologies, most traditional performance genres began a struggle for survival in order to remain relevant in a digital age. The problem of this study therefore is an appraisal of masking among the Igbo in the face of the rising face of media technology with the aim of re-positioning it within a performative framework that will meet the tests of the digital age especially with the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The study finds that masking can survive in the new age in spite of the pandemic if it is made more secular and media friendly. It thus recommends that adherents of Igbo culture should aim at bringing Igbo masking performances within the Intangible Cultural Heritage by playing down on the sacred and exhibiting more of the aesthetics and entertainment aspects of the performance.

Keywords: Masking, Masquerading, Performance, Pandemic, Media.

INTRODUCTION

The Igbo people of South-Eastern Nigeria are known for their vibrant and colourful traditional festivals among which is the masquerade performance. Masquerade, masquerading, masking are all linguistic variants of a performance tradition of the Igbo. These terms will be used interchangeably in this study for they represent that phenomenon of masquerading that consists of willing suspension of disbelief wherein the masked characters are taken to be spirit beings that had come to interact with the living. Hence, it is often said that the masquerade phenomenon is “a vehicle for the manifestation of the dead and other supernatural forces including nature spirits and deities, as well as idols created by the imagination and reinforced by means of ritual and magic” (Enekwe 56). In other words, “it is a physical and abstract creation of man in order to comprehend his world better as he approximates the spirits of dead ancestors and gods” (Embu 55). Similarly, Chukwuma Okoye in his study on Igbo masquerade costume posits that “... the masquerade is a spirit being who is essentially no stranger in Igbo cosmos. He is a legitimate member of the Igbo community.” (3). And Alex Asigbo avers that the masquerades are “not mere human beings but manifestations from the spirit realm of the ancestors and other disembodied beings seeking communion with the living.” (2) Thus it is believed that it “embodies the philosophy and world view of the Igbo” (Okeke, 1),

The association of the masquerade tradition with spirits, ancestors and the dead has made it more of a ritual and a sacred practice than it is secular. Consequently, there are some cultic associations to

it especially when the phenomenon is an exclusive preserve of the male folk; not just every male, but the initiated male. This presupposes that there are rules and norms guiding the masking tradition among the Igbo and the secrets of the masquerade are made known only to the initiates.

Among the Igbo, the rite of initiation into the masquerade cult is known as *Ikpu Ani*, *Ima Mmuo* or *Iba Mmonwu* depending on the linguistic variant of the Igbo community where it is performed. This literally means a spiritual journey into the spirit world. This initiation rite marks the beginning of adolescence of the male child because one can only get initiated between the age of 12 and 14 years. (Although there has been some exceptional cases where one can be initiated at an older age especially when such a person or his family resides outside his ancestral home). At this ceremony, the children are taught the basics principles and practices associated with manhood and what society expects of them as youths. It is actually a means of instilling morality in the youths because while they are being lead into the secrets of the masquerade tradition they are equally bound by some oaths of secrecy and are made to understand the consequences of going against societal norms and mores. It is therefore after this rite of passage that the male child begins to see himself as a man. Consequently, only the initiated male child is qualified to participate in the masquerade tradition of the Igbo.

Although it is a given that every masked character is a masquerade of sort, the Igbo masking tradition is broadly categorized into two: the day masquerade (*Mmonwu efifie*) and the Night

Masquerade (*Mmonwu Anyasi*). The day masquerades, as their names imply, are those that feature during the day. This category of masquerades comprise mostly of the dancing and singing types. In fact, they entertain and can be watched by any member of the community. Yet, among the *mmonwu effifie* are some further categorizations. These include the very playful masquerades which are mostly those performed by children. These have no ritual associations. Then there are the very energetic types that are performed by youths. These include masquerades that flog/whip; the *Udo* and *Ajibuusu*, and can give chase and the ferocious types like the *Agaba* and *Okwomma*. Among this category are some that have ritual associations. For example, it is common belief that the *Agaba* and *Okwomma* and in some rare instances the extraordinary ones such as the zoomorphic and anthropomorphic ones like the *Ijele*, *Atu* and *Izaga* perform through magical means. This belief is occasioned by the design of their costumes and properties and the nature of their respective performances which usually appear out of the ordinary. Beyond the youthful masquerades are the elderly ones that are performed by adults. These categories of masquerades, though they perform during the day, are highly sacred and ritualistic. In general they are classified as *Ajo Mmuo* (Bad Masquerade) because there are a lot of secrecy surrounding their appearances and performances.

The second broad category of Igbo masquerade is the *mmonwu anyasi* (night masquerade). These feature only at night and there are a lot of myths surrounding their manifestations. Okoye, in "Form and Process in Igbo Masquerade Art" states that for the night masquerade, "speaking, chanting and singing in disguised Ududo (spider) voice, under the mask of darkness is more than enough disguise since only the initiated come out to watch and follow the night masquerade." (95), similarly, Sunday Ododo, in his discourse on night masquerade performances submits that "night (darkness), voice disguise, pseudonyms and fear have become potent masking factors that sometimes de-emphasize the use of proper masks, the root word for masquerade." (29). The design of the night masquerade performances which are mostly characterized by the absence of formal costume save for the basic embellishments of raffia enhancers worn at the waist makes is a taboo for females and the uninitiated males to see them and secondly, they perform under the cover of darkness. Thus, the chant of "*eh oku eh...!*" (oh!

Light o!) heralds the approach of the night masquerades. The chant is a warning that all manner of lights be put out so that no one could see the masquerade in its entirety. Nevertheless, the night masquerades, despite their heavy ritual associations, perform salient social functions for the society. For instance, the *Onyekulie*, and *Atunma*, are known as satirists. They lampoon people who are not doing good in the society even they are known to openly criticize rulers who are high handed or a partial in the discharge of justice,

However, as the *mmonwu* tradition of the Igbo is battling with sustainability as a consequence of the effects of modernity occasioned by Christianity, urbanization and globalization, the Corona virus pandemic, known as Covid-19, brought nearly every cultural festival to a standstill because the effect of the pandemic resulted in the global ban on social gatherings including Church services and other forms of ceremonies as well as traditional festivals. In fact, the world was in a lock down for nearly a year. This study therefore seeks an alternative way of performing masking within the present culture of social distancing which frowns at gatherings as a means of sustaining the masking tradition amidst the challenges of modernity.

Mediatization and Pandemic

The term mediatization may not be readily defined as a single concept for there are varying scholarly definitions of it but, in all of the definitions there is an agreement that it is a means through which the media is used to influence society. Irina Ushanova avers that it is "among the major social processes that change culture and communication" (2703), and Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp, state that mediatization is needed "... to encompass the broad consequences of media in our lives..." (196). Similarly, Nick Couldry in an analysis of the main approaches to mediatization studies posits that it is "not a single transformative logic "within" media but a meta-category of social description that points to the changed dynamics and dimensionality of the (whole) social world in a media age." (6). In other words, it is "a paradigm shift in media research." (Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby 314). It follows therefore that as a process that is aimed at affecting positive societal changes through the media that mediatization is a necessary intervention in the performance of the Igbo masquerade as a means of sustaining such an eloquent cultural tradition especially when it is considered that "the media offer societies platforms for interactions" and "... provide avenues for public discourse over societal

challenges.” (Nnamene 12). This position is informed by the fact that proponents of mediatization and other media theories agree that the media as a means of mediation transforms society. Hence, Stig Hjarvard in a paper presented to the 57th ICA conference in 2007 in San Francisco posits that titled “Changing Media, Changing Language: The Mediatization of Society and the Spread of English and Medialects” posits that;

As a concept mediatization denotes the processes through which core elements of a cultural or social activity (e.g. politics, religion, language) assume media form. As a consequence, the activity is to a greater or lesser degree performed through interaction with a medium, and the symbolic content and the structure of the social and cultural activities are influenced by media environments which they gradually become more dependent upon. (“Changing Media...” 3)

Further definitions of mediatization equally points to the fact that it is a process through which the media mediates between the society and the masses by helping in the dissemination of information by bringing facts together under one code. In another discourse on the effects of mediatization on society Hjarvard avers that “the concept most central to an understanding of the importance of media to culture is mediatization. The term has been in numerous contexts to characterize the influence media exert on a variety of phenomena...” (106). And Fredric Jameson is of the opinion that “mediatization as a process whereby traditional fine arts... come to consciousness of themselves as various media within a mediatic system.” (162).

To mediatize performance thus becomes very imperative in the face of the Corona virus (Covid-19) pandemic that has made the world frown at public gatherings and there has been the institutionalization of the wearing of nose masks with the attendant washing of hands and the frequent use of hand sanitizers.

According to the NCDC;

Corona viruses are zoonotic, meaning they are normally transmitted between animals and people. The corona virus disease (Covid-19) is caused by a new strain of corona virus (SARS-CoV-2) that has not been previously identified in humans. It was first reported to WHO on 31st of December, 2019 in Wuhan, China (NCDC Coronavirus Covid-19 Microsite np).

Correspondingly, the World Health Organization, Europe, reports that;

Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases. A novel coronavirus (nCoV) is a new strain that has not been previously identified in humans. The new virus was subsequently named “COVID-19 virus”. (WHO/Europe np).

With the outbreak of the virus and the speed with which it spread to other countries of the world and the attendant deaths that came at its wake, the WHO declared the disease a pandemic. WHO reports that “on 11 March, 2020, the rapid increase in the number of cases outside China led the WHO Director-General to announce that the outbreak could be characterized as a pandemic”. (np).

A pandemic “is a disease outbreak that spreads across countries or continents. It affects more people and takes more lives than an epidemic”. (np). A pandemic is known to be different from either an epidemic or an outbreak because whereas a pandemic spreads across countries and continents, an epidemic does not cross borders. It is said to have occurred “when an infectious disease spreads quickly to more people than experts would expect”. (np). This presupposes that an epidemic can be easily contained as it does not go beyond certain boundaries. An outbreak, on the other hand, takes place “when an illness happens in unexpected high numbers. It may stay in one area or extend more widely”. (np). Of the three forms of illnesses, a pandemic is the most severe and that was what the world witnessed with the outbreak of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) disease.

Accordingly, the Covid-19 pandemic brought the world to a near standstill with the global ban on public gatherings and the institution of social distancing and the other restrictions that came with the pandemic. It thus affected social and cultural activities including trade and commerce as well as education. However, respite came with the production of the Covid-19 vaccines. It is reported that “as of 3 June 2021, WHO has evaluated that the following vaccines against Covid-19 have met the necessary criteria for safety and efficacy: AstraZeneca/Oxford Vaccine; Johnson and Johnson; Moderna; Pfizer/Bion Tech; Sinopharm and Sinovac”. (np).

With the advent of the vaccines and the seeming low spread of the virus, there came some relaxations of the restrictions especially as it

concerns travelling and public gatherings. Hence, social events like marriages, funerals and Church services have commenced albeit with relegated observances.

As the world gradually emerges from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, cultural players, in line with global best practices have embraced the media as a means of reaching wider audiences for the sustainability of the performing arts. Charles Nwadike thus observes that, “observations of current trends in the performing arts show that the modern theatre benefits immensely from the increasing advances in science and technology. This trend, a response to the global digital march has virtually turned the 21st century performance art into a designer’s theatre characterized by electronic gadgetry”. It is therefore been proposed in this paper that Igbo masking should be mediatized in order to position the masquerade art to meet current trends in global performances as well as create an avenue for its sustainability and an increased audience participation.

Mediatizing Masking

The performance of Igbo masking is replete with spectacle and entertainment. As such, the appearance of every masquerade is greeted with mixed feeling ranging from excitement, admiration, trepidation to awe depending on the perceived code of the individual masquerade’s concept and design. For example, the performance of an *Ijele* masquerade and similar anthropomorphic and zoomorphic masks as well as some entertaining/dancing ones like *Ajikwu* and *Agboghommuo* create excitement and pleasure and the spectators admire the performance while the appearance and acts of an *Udo* or *Ajibusu* and other forms of whipping/flogging masquerades fill the audience with trepidation and fear. However, masquerades like *Agaba* and *Okwomma* are watched with awe and trepidation. In the same vein some *Ajo mmuo* (bad masquerade) like *Isi-Aba-Offia* (head that cannot enter the bush), and *Ikpele Ukwu Di Ana Nso*

(The knee ever close to the ground) are watched with apprehension and anxiety.

This composite performance tradition of the Igbo is at present being threatened by the challenges posed by the continued technological developments in mass media and recently the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, it is being proposed that the Igbo should re-adapt the masquerade perform to conform to current realities

in terms of audience participation and sustainability. To mediatize masking therefore becomes a most viable option.

There is no gainsaying the fact that live performances are being threatened by the media; first it was the Television and the Cinema against live theatre. But, with increase in technological developments on the media space, the threat has crept into traditional performances and if such performances are not moved into the currency of the media challenge there is the tendency of a gradual elimination of these performances. It thus becomes pertinent that ways and means of bringing the Igbo masquerade performance up to speed with recent technological developments in performances be adduced in order to sustain the relevance of the masking tradition among the Igbo.

To mediatize masking therefore, researchers into traditional Igbo performances should endeavour to record and archive such events in real time. This will entail visiting, participating and encouraging practitioners and traditional rulers to avail the media the opportunity of broadcasting the performances. It presupposes that the masquerade festivals such as the *Uzo Iyi* Festival of the Umuoji people in Idemmili North Local Government Area of Anambra State, the *Mkpukpa* Festival of the Umudioka people of Dunukofia Local Government of Anambra state as well as other traditional Igbo masking activities like the *Imo Oka*, *Nwafor Ogidi*, *Akpu Okochi Ukpo* amongst others should be organized in a so as to allow for media presence.

What however, has been the contention of practitioners of Igbo tradition is the sacredness of the masks. It has always been argued amongst the local communities and adherents of traditional Igbo religion that bringing Igbo masking into global media space will ‘desecrate’ the sanctity of the masquerades as it is believed that the masquerades are not mere social/entertaining characters but are spirit beings who had come to commune with the living. Conversely, it can be contended that not all masks are sacred masks and by implication the secular ones might blaze the trail in the mediatization agenda. Yet, even the supposedly sacred ones can equally be mediatized especially when it is considered that the rituals that make these masquerades sacred can likewise be reversed to allow for the participation of the media at every masking event.

In compliance with the pandemic guidelines of social distancing and avoidance of public

gatherings, the masquerade performances could be projected on large screens at dedicated areas within the arena where the performances take place. For example, the *Uzo Iyi* Festival of the Umoji people already has an arena where the event takes place. In order to avoid crowding, an elevated platform could be erected upon which a large screen will be placed. As the masquerades perform live to the audience within the arena, the same performance will be projected and streamed live to audiences within and around the performance space and even to those at home. The reach of this live streaming might go beyond the town depending on the band width of the broadcasting equipment. Other towns such as Ogidi, Umudioka, Awka, Ukpo and so on that have annual masquerade festivals can equally mediatize their performance and through this a wider audience will be got and the masking event will move from a local arrangement to a global event.

Beyond the media attention that mediatizing Igbo masking and the expected global acceptance of the phenomenon, mediatization of the masquerades will open up economic avenues for the communities that perform these activities. First, through appropriate organizational structuring; the recording of the events should not be allowed to be happenstances as is the practice at present when individual steal these views and post on social media, but, the arrangements should be such that any media group or individual should be formally registered so that the output will be censored by the organizers. Through the registrations, the communities will earn some income from the masquerade event(s). More so, the organizers can create dedicated social media handles such that prospective audiences can subscribe in order to view the performances. This will also determine the extent of the transmissions since it is only the authorized media people that will be allowed to air the contents.

CONCLUSION

Masquerading among the Igbo exists and will continue to exist but the gradual and eventual shift from public gatherings occasioned by the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic has made the re-assessment of the continued existence of the phenomenon exigent at this time. It is therefore believed that if and when masking is made more popular through the secularization of its activities via the media that it will be more generally accepted and seen as a means of entertainment not

only to the owners and practitioners of such tradition but to the global community at large.

It is thus the position of this study that Igbo masking should be opened up to the world through the media while retaining its sacrosanct qualities as the concept and modes of emergence of the masquerades for performances; that is, the preparations, should still be kept out of the prying lens of the media. What should be mediatized is the performance.

It is believed that mediatizing Igbo masking will put the tradition in the global space while at the same time bring in revenue to the communities that host the masking events.

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