

## MASQUERADE, THE VISIBLE SPIRIT IN IGBO SPIRITUAL UNIVERSE: A SYMBOL OF CULTURE AND SPIRITUALITY

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### Abstract

In many African cultures, spirituality is deeply connected with daily life, tradition, and identity. It is a physical representations of the spirits of ancestors through the adornment of the masks. One of the most prominent and visually striking expressions of this spiritual presence in the Igbo culture is the masquerade, an art form and cultural practice that represents the crossway of the physical and the spiritual worlds. Masquerades are not mere performances, but rituals that reveal, mediate, and engage the invisible spirits that are believed to influence the lives of the living. These masquerades are considered embodiment of the spirits of ancestors, gods, or supernatural forces, and they often appear during important cultural, religious, and social events. Masquerade is an exclusive secret society performed only by initiated men and involve the use of colourful costumes and unique spiritual language meant to invoke the ancestral spirits of the dead.

### Masquerade and the Igbo Spiritual Universe

In Igbo cosmology, the world is seen as a complex interaction between the physical realm and the unseen spiritual forces. According to historian and anthropologist, Adiele Afigbo (1981), "The masquerade tradition in Igbo land is a manifestation of the people's deep-seated belief in the existence of a spiritual realm, which is inhabited by ancestors, gods, and other supernatural beings" (p. x). This belief is reflected in the various types of masquerades that exist in Igbo land, each with its unique characteristics, significance, and functions. The spirit world, made up of ancestors (*ndi ichie*), deities (*Alusi*), and various other entities, is believed to constantly intervene in human affairs (Afigbo, 1981). The masquerade, as an important cultural artifact, serves as a visible manifestation of these spiritual forces.

Masquerades are typically ritualistic performances where elaborate costumes, masks, and adornments are worn to embody spirits or supernatural beings. These performances can take many forms, depending on the spirit being represented, the specific community, and the occasion (Ogbalu, 1979). Through the masquerade, a person or group temporarily becomes an intermediary between the world of the living and that of the spirits, conveying messages, performing rituals, or celebrating sacred events (Afigbo, 1981).

### The Masks- More Than Just Decoration

The mask is perhaps the most crucial element of the masquerade. It is not just a tool for disguise, but a powerful spiritual artifact (Nzekwu, 1963). The mask is considered to house the spirit of the deity or ancestor it represents. In this way, the "wearer" of the mask is thought to "become" the spirit, embodying its power and influence (Nzimiro, 1985). The mask is often carefully crafted, and its design is loaded with meaning, incorporating elements that reflect the spiritual or mythical identity of the being it represents.

Masks are made from a variety of materials such as wood, fiber, fabric, and metal, each chosen for its symbolic significance (Ottenberg, 1975). The shape, color, and style of the mask also carry deep meanings. For example, a mask with large eyes might represent heightened awareness or the ability to see into the spirit world, while a mask with elongated features might symbolize a connection to the divine or the ancestors (Nzimiro, 1985). Masquerade in Igbo community is called *mmanwu* / *mmaonwu* (literally, the good thing about death- *ndi nwuruanwu*) connoting our ancestors who lived and have left the physical realm but believed to be in constant interaction with the community they left behind (Afigbo, 1981).

*Mmanwu* can be described as mystery masquerade, the visible spirit, *mmanwu* from the physical perspective portrays a social institution, a political organ and a pressure group in the Igbo society (Ogbalu, 1979). It is also a dance-music-play. Membership of *mmanwu* society is graded. Each *mmanwu* cell has an inner circle and an outer circle.

#### a) The Inner circle:

This includes the masked figure and the initiated males. The focal point of the inner circle is the masque which usually involves a duality – male and female – and is supposed to be of the spiritual order. The mother masque (*nne mmuo*) and the dwarf male (*ukwu mmuo*) are supposed to be the incarnations of the spirits of the clan. When they speak, their voices should sound superhuman.

After the masque come the initiated males who know the mystery of the masquerade. One enters the ranks of the inner circle through the rite of initiation. This usually involves four processes:

- i. The stole fee
- ii. The ordeal

iii. The Epiphany

iv. The learning of symbols (*ikpa (akpukpa) or ahimia mmuo*).

**i. The Stole fee:** This is the fee the candidate for initiation pays to the initiators and to *mmanwu* group. This differs with different *mmanwu* groups. Some do pay in cash, others in kind, yet others in both cash and kind.

**ii. The Ordeal:** Initiation rites involve passage from one state of existence to another, a fact that must be brought out in ritual. In the case of *mmanwu*, the initiate passes from the state of being an *ogbodu/ofeke* (uninitiated) to that of the illuminated, the adult recognized as such by *mmanwu*.

Rites of passage usually involve an ordeal, some difficult undertaking that brings home to the candidate the fact that his previous state of existence has come to an end. In olden times, candidates for *mmanwu* initiation used to disappear for seven (7) native weeks. During that period people were told that the spirit had eaten them. They lived in thick groves away from the hunts of man. At the end of that ordeal period the chanting girls/cheer leaders used to go in search of them. Their formal initiation into *mmanwu* used to take place the night before they would be discovered. Dangerous and notorious candidates used to disappear for ever or given a thorough torture during the ordeal period. These were people who posed as threat both to the community and to the *mmanwu* society as such, i.e. those who for one reason or another would not be able to keep the *mmanwu* secrets.

In the modern time, the ordeal could take place in a single night. It might well consist of just a personal confrontation with the dreaded mask, which could use sheer brute to subdue the trembling youth. After the ordeal one is supposed to be a man and to know the secrets of the land.

**iii. The Epiphany:** This is the manifestation of what the mask really is, the unveiling of the visible spirit to the candidates for initiation. In other words, the spirit behind the mask has to reveal its nature. We have no intention here of revealing this secret to the uninitiated. In some cultures, it may take weeks of exacting initiation rituals to get accepted into the Igbo masquerade cult. The initiation rituals were mostly violent and only some men could endure through the cult. (Biafran update: 2021)

The initiation process and the modern perceptive of masquerade have changed overtime.

**iv. The learning of Symbols (*Ikpa ahimia mmuo*):** There is always a secret behind every cult. *Mmanwu* is a cult clouded in secrecy. As such it has its pass-word unknown to the uninitiated. The pass-word consists of the three symbols to be demonstrated with the hands. They are very simple but very meaningful to the members and they all refer to some aspects of the mask. We repeat, we have no intention of revealing the secrets of *mmanwu* to the uninitiated. The symbols are universal to all *mmanwu* groups. To know them is to know the *mmanwu* secrets. To reveal them to the uninitiated is the crime of *itikwo isi mmanwu* (shattering the head of *mmanwu*). This crime is punishable with heavy penalties and sanctions. One proves his initiation into *mmanwu* cult to a group in another clan by plucking the herb of *mmanwu* (*ikpa ahimia mmanwu*) i.e. by giving the pass-word. One learns the pass-word on the night of his initiation into *mmanwu*.

**b. Outer Circle:**

This takes in the chanting girls or cheer girls and other women who assist them with chanting and sweeping of *mmanwu* grounds. They ensure that the *ilo-mmanwu* is tidied up at all times particularly during festival periods.

**The Role of *Mmanwu* in Igbo Society**

*Mmanwu* cult has already been located on the social map.

In traditional Igbo society, masquerades play an important role in social, political, and religious life. They are often associated with significant community events such as festivals, rites of passage, funerals, and initiations. They serve both practical and symbolic purposes, helping to preserve tradition and reinforce communal values, such as:

**i) Social Control and Justice: *Mmanwu* is a social institution. It operates as a social organism, as a moral body. It is hierarchically constituted and its “cells” in different villages and clans are in constant and vital contact with each other.** In many Igbo communities, masquerades are involved in maintaining social order and enforcing justice. They represent a secret cult where members, often elders, are adorned with ceremonial costumes to regulate societal behavior and settle disputes. The masqueraders have the authority to mete out punishments and maintain law and order, especially in the areas of moral conduct, property rights, and community disputes.

**ii) It is a dance-music-Play: *Mmanwu* supplies the necessary recreational needs of a given rural community.** It incorporates choral chanting, dances, instrumental music and communal gesticulations into the drama of its masquerading. It is so well organized that it takes in the global structure of the Igbo man's philosophy of life. The initiates dance around the masks. The chanting girls keep their distance in fear and trembling, while the uninitiated (*ogbodu/ofeke*) keep far away in bushes out of sheer fearsome. Yet there is joy and merriment shared in by the entire community both old and young. Masquerades are a powerful tool for cultural transmission, particularly in the teaching of history, moral values, and customs. Through the display of traditional dances, songs, lore and rituals, masqueraders communicate cultural narratives and collective memories to younger generations. These performances often reenact important historical events or myths, preserving and celebrating the identity of the community.

iii) It is a political organ: In olden days, *mmanwu* was the last court of appeal in the clans where it was found (Ogbalu, 1979). The decision of the “spirit” incarnate in the mask was irrevocable (Afigbo, 1981). Living memory still preserves this role of *mmanwu*, and modern attempts at governing the Igbo through local councils, houses of Parliament, the law court, and the armed forces have not yet made enough impact on the political sense of this people to extinguish the political role of age-old phenomena like *mmanwu* and great oracles (Nzimiro, 1985). From time to time, *mmanwu* groups that feel they are the strongest power in any given village take the law into their own hands and begin to hunt down all those who would not comply with their decisions for the village.

Instance:

A girl who would not chant for *mmanwu* and would not sweep *mmanwu* arena with other girls -mainly for reasons of conscience- are persecuted in a peculiar manner: *Mmanwu* youths would make a sweep at her home and carry off fowl, goats, or other useful property (Okonjo, 1976). This would be repeated till her parents or guardians give her up to the service of *mmanwu*.

Young men who would not pay *mmanwu* dues (tax) and who would not work and dance for *mmanwu* -for reasons of conscience mainly-are persecuted in like manner (Nzimiro, 1985). *Mmanwu* makes use of all the means of social control to bring dissident persons and groups to obey its laws for any given village. Wherever the government is weak or just fails to pull its weight, *mmanwu* rules supreme and with an iron hand (Afigbo, 1981). At times, the very custodians of the law -the police agents and the local councilors -are *mmanwu* initiates. In that case, recourse to the law of the country means appealing to *mmanwu* members against *mmanwu*. The advent of the white man in Igbo land saw the cult very useful, yet they got rid of that system and introduced their own system.

The anonymity of the personality of the masked “spirits” makes the authority of *mmanwu* inhuman, arbitrary, and autocratic (Ogbalu, 1979). Influential persons in the group usurp the system for their selfish purposes -that is, use *mmanwu* to punish their personal enemies and that with impunity (Nzimiro, 1985).

iv) It represents a pressure group in a given society: In *mmanwu* parliament is found all the die hards (the hawks) in a given clan. The wisdom of age is very often lacking there, for the simple reason that the aged are not strong enough to attend the mid-night sessions. Domineering personalities among the young push the policies of the group beyond what would be acceptable in an open and village meeting. The anonymous mask executes the decrees of fanatics to the dismay of the old who because of the secret nature of *mmanwu* society are bound to say nothing.

v) The Binding force of *Mmanwu* Government: The secret behind the blind obedience accorded to the mask is the oat of secrecy sworn by every initiated member on the night of the initiation. Each member swears an oat of secrecy and binds himself to abide by all the decisions of the mask. This remains the sustainer and source of *mmanwu*'s absolute authority.

vi) **Religious and Spiritual Significance:** *Mmanwu* is considered sacred in many Igbo communities. They are seen as visible manifestations of ancestral spirits (*Ndi Ichie*) and deities (*Alusi*). The masquerader, by donning the mask, temporarily "becomes" the spirit or the deity, channeling divine powers and wisdom. This connection to the spirit world allows the *mmanwu* to fulfill various religious functions, such as offering sacrifices, invoking blessings, or providing protection to the community.

#### **Masquerades in Contemporary Igbo Society**

Though traditional masquerade practices continue to hold great importance in Igbo society, they face significant challenges in the modern era. The encroachment of Christianity, urbanization, and globalization has altered the religious and cultural picture, leading to changes in how masquerades are viewed and practiced. Some see masquerade performances as relics of the past, while others work to preserve and adapt the traditions to contemporary realities.

However, masquerades remain a vital symbol of Igbo identity, providing a powerful tool for cultural heritage. In urban areas, masquerades may be adapted for more public, less religious purposes, such as community festivals or entertainment performances. These adaptations highlight the continued relevance of the masquerade as both a spiritual expression and a form of cultural pride.

#### **Mmanwu and the Church**

The relationship between *mmanwu* and the church has not been friendly. The two institutions have always viewed each other as mortal enemies. Candidates for baptism have had to renounce *mmanwu* initiation in a lot of places. Initiated Christians have been denied the sacraments till they showed evidence of renouncing their membership of the “forbidden” society.

The church based its condemnation of *mmanwu* on the “devilish actions” perpetrated by the group: the use of charm, sacrifices to idols before big shows, the idea of spirits being believed to be incarnate in the mask, the victimization of dissident groups and persons, the oat of secrecy sworn on idols etc. the church on its part does

not want rivals nor competition with any cult group. They are determined to uphold their dominance and superiority over any rival groups that coexist with them.

The Church's Present Dilemma: It is now common knowledge that the chief rulers of the *mmanwu* society are nominal Christians. They have enlisted the co-operation of animists (pagans) to persecute other Christians who would not co-operate for the progress of *mmanwu*.

### **Reconciling Church and Culture: A Call for Reformation**

*Mmanwu* in itself, as a social institution, is not bad. This principle must be always borne in mind. The Charter of the United Nations (1945) has it that the human person has the right to enter into association and take active part in them.

*Mmanwu* can and does infringe on the rights of persons to liberty of action and of conscience. We have seen how it persecutes those who would not take part in its activities. People must be left at liberty to join the association or not. To use force to bring a man or a woman to become an active member of the inner or the outer circle is against the United Nation's declaration on human rights.

The church is not the enemy of *mmanwu*. one should not throw the bath water away with the baby. Time has gone when lay men wait on the clergy to tell them what to do in purely social events. Enlightened Christians should go out boldly to work out their vocation in society and not by fighting shy of it. Nevertheless, *mmanwu* needs reform in order that the good in it should be preserved for posterity and for the furtherance of Igbo culture. To work for its annihilation would be to condemn ourselves to the fate of a people without a culture. It is the duty of the lay man to reform *mmanwu* and if possible from within. They should not throw their responsibility on the priest. He is there to give right principles (for those who knows).

Every vestige of idol worship and swearing on idols involved in *mmanwu* cannot be accepted by Christians who would be initiate.

### **Practical Considerations:**

In some of Igbo communities today many people are confused as to the Church's stand on *mmanwu*. *Mmanwu* in itself has not been condemned by the church. We have pointed out practices of *mmanwu* society in which Christians as such cannot take part. But a Christian has no right either to prevent an animist from following the dictates of his animist conscience. In the same way an animist has no right to prevent a christian from following his christian conscience. Vatican II's declaration on Religious Liberty has declared that the right to religious liberty belongs to persons not to ideas like truth or religion. Truth as an idea has no rights and obligations. Only persons have rights and obligations. Every human person has a right to religious liberty whether or not his actual religion is considered true or false by any religious group in the society in question. The right to religious liberty belongs to persons not ideas like truth.

Where *mmanwu* touches on religious ritual, that is, sacrifices to spirits and oaths on idols- the conscience of every member must be safeguarded, animist and christian alike. Christian have no right to abolish such practices both for themselves and for animists. They have the right to insist that their own conscience is respected. But they have no right to demand that animists follow the dictates of the Christian religion on such matters. The best thing to be done here is to by-pass the religious issue and modernize the *mmanwu* society along scientific and demythologized lines. The then government of the East Central State has done such a thing with the Customary Courts which it replaced with Magistrate Courts. That was a very radical social reform. *Mmanwu* needs such a reform. Modern organizations have recognized means of binding people to keep the terms of their contract with the particular organization in question. A code of rules and of the penalties for breaking them can be drawn up to be signed by candidates for initiation and kept under lock and key. Competent authorities in the country should be able to examine the contents of such rules to make sure they do not infringe on social justice. Such an openness to the scrutiny of the supreme authority in the country would remove the *mmanwu* society from the ban and suspicion under which secret societies as such labour. This does not prevent the masquerade society from guarding its secrets from the uninitiated, and from keeping its books under lock and key.

The amount of fear and trembling demanded by *mmanwu* today is unworthy of the present stage of Igbo civilization. It betrays a futile struggle by people who for one reason or another have missed the boat of progress in education or money-making and who still want to feel that they are at the top of the struggle. So much mystery is built around simple facts that can only frighten children. The *mmanwu* society should grow up. The lack of mental development manifested in the management of *mmanwu* affairs is simply disturbing. It makes one feel embarrassed. The society needs to be redeemed from itself. Its economic potential needs to be tapped by experts in that science. Why should the *Obom/uno-mmanwu* not become a miniature stadium which one pays a gate fee to enter?

To boycott the *mmanwu* society is not the Christian missionary approach. To formulate a christian decree on *mmanwu* to which the animists will be cajoled to comply, would be blatant bullying and exploitation of the weak. The animist also has a right to religious liberty. The christian cannot escape the implications of life in a pluralist society. Not to get involved with animists would be to hanker after the flesh pots of an idealistic christian village. Enlightened and influential Christians are needed to enter the *mmanwu* ranks and reform it from within, without infringing on the religious rights and beliefs of anyone, christian or animist.

### **Types of Masquerades in Igbo Society**

The Igbo masquerades are broadly grouped into two: those that perform in the day and those that perform at night. Igbo masquerades come in many forms, each with its own symbolism, ritual, and significance. These masquerades are often categorized based on their function, the spirit they represent, or the specific community that practices them. In the past, Masquerades were not just used for entertainment; they served political roles too. They stood as custodians of village and clan laws. Anybody who broke the law risk being sanctioned by the visit of myriad of masquerades. The story of Igbo masquerades being spirits was still much believed. There is a popular believe that masquerades were not human and weren't born by women – it is believed that they come out from ant holes at midnight and disappeared. The masquerade was revered at that time and every information surrounding their existence, place of rest and even as little as costumes were not public discussion nor a common knowledge. Civilization has sort of watered down the relevance of masquerades in rural communities, despite this, one still discover strong masquerades cults in some Igbo communities like in Ekwusigo, Ohafia, Aguata and Orumba areas.

#### ***Ijele* Masquerade**

The *Ijele* masquerade is one of the most iconic forms of masquerade among the Igbo. It is mostly associated with royalty or political occasions, such as the installation of a new king, an annual festival, or the celebration of a prominent individual's achievements. The *mmanwu Ijele*, often adorned in beautiful robes and an elaborate headgear, symbolizes ancestral authority and serves as a mediator between the people and the spirits. The *Ijele* is believed to be the king of all Igbo masquerades. In any occasion the *Ijele* is going to display, expect it to come out last. Before the *Ijele* comes out, the entire arena would be free of other masquerades.

#### ***Adamma* Masquerade**

Another important type of masquerade in Igbo land is the *Agbogho mmuo* or *Adamma* masquerade, which is associated with fertility and agriculture. As noted by anthropologist, Victor Uchendu (1965), The *Agbogho mmuo* masquerade is a symbol of the Igbo people's deep connection with the land, and their dependence on agriculture for their survival. The *Adamma* masquerade is another significant form of masquerade, especially in the southeastern part of Igbo land. The name alone - *Adamma* - literally translates to "Maiden of Beauty". This masquerade represents the earth goddess (*Ala*), the most revered deity in the Igbo pantheon. Dressed in colorful robes and masks, the *Adamma* masqueraders engage in spiritual cleansing ceremonies and offerings to the goddess, symbolizing the community's reverence for nature, fertility, and the protection of the land. It is never a terrifying Igbo masquerade. It relied on beauty to bring its awe. *Adamma* is still respected as the most beautiful masquerade in Igbo land.

#### ***Agaba/Okwomma/Otawalikpo***

In most climes, these three masquerades represent the same genre. The *Agaba* is a machete-bearing fearsome masquerade known for its huge and jutting front teeth and ugly persona. *Agaba* is not a masquerade for kids. It is said that a pregnant must never behold this masquerade in broad daylight, else she might either miscarry or give birth to a baby similitude of *Agaba*.

#### ***Mmanwu Ugo***

*Mmanwu Ugo* is an elegant masquerade. It is one of the most expensive masquerades to showcase in Igbo land. The *Ugo* masquerade like any other animal-spirit masquerade (*Atu*, *Mmanwu Odum*, *Agu Iyi*) etc. embodies both the mannerisms and significance of the *ugo* bird (African eagle).

Eagles are highly respected birds in Igbo land. You will likely only see the *Ugo* masquerade displaying on big occasions like *ofalas*. It is a wonder to behold, from its subtle and graceful dance steps to the moment it drops to the floor to lay an egg.

#### ***Izaga***

The *Izaga* masquerade is the tallest masquerade in Igbo land. Displaying the *Izaga* masquerade is not a child's play. A lot of technicalities go into it. This is why one is likely not to sight the *Izaga* masquerade in a small village occasion. During its display, the entire audience is held spellbound. Any small miscalculation or misstep and the *Izaga* will trip and come crashing to the ground. And it must never be heard that an *Izaga* fell.

The masquerade tradition in Igbo land is not just limited to the above mentioned types, but encompasses a wide range of masquerades, each with its unique characteristics and significance. According to historian, Elizabeth Isichei (1976), the masquerade tradition in Igbo land is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, which reflects the people's deep connection with the spiritual realm, their ancestors, and the natural world. Aside the above

mentioned day masquerades, there are other masquerades known to perform only at night time especially during traditional festivals, burial ceremonies and rituals.

### **Igbo Night Masquerades: A Symbol of Spirituality and Cultural Heritage**

In Igbo culture, night masquerades are an integral part of the traditional spiritual and cultural practices. These masquerades perform at night, typically during special occasions such as festivals, ceremonies, and rituals.

According to historian and anthropologist, Afigbo (1981), "The night masquerades are a manifestation of the Igbo people's deep connection with the spiritual realm". These masquerades are believed to possess spiritual powers, which are invoked to communicate with the ancestors, gods, and other supernatural beings.

The night masquerades are generally performed by men, who wear elaborate masks and costumes to conceal their identities. The masks are often decorated with symbolic designs and colors, which represent different aspects of Igbo culture and spirituality.

The performances of the night masquerades are often accompanied by music, dance, reproachful and storytelling. These performances serve as a means of cultural transmission, where important aspects of Igbo history, mythology, and cultural values are passed down to younger generations.

According to Uchendu (1965), The night masquerades are an important part of Igbo cultural heritage, and serve as a means of preserving and promoting Igbo cultural traditions. Some examples of night masquerades include: *Ajikwu*, *Omenikoro*, *Ogbagu* etc.

*Ajikwu*, *Ogbagu*, *Omenikoro* are among the popular night masquerades in Igboland, never seen in daylight. They keep surveillance of the community as well entertain at night. Night masquerades are revered because they do not come out for nothing. It is a bad omen to be visited by either of these masquerades at night. The *Ajikwu* in particular is a very political masquerade used for cautioning or punishing those that have committed an offense. The Igbo night masquerades are a significant aspect of Igbo cultural and spiritual practices. These masquerades serve as a means of communicating with the spiritual realm, conveying cultural values and themes, and preserving Igbo cultural heritage.

### **Gender Roles and Masquerades**

Masquerades in Igbo society are largely male-dominated, with men typically performing most masquerade roles. However, there are notable exceptions. In some communities, women are allowed to participate, often in the form of specific female masquerades that represent female deities or ancestors. The role of women in masquerade performances can vary from region to region, with some villages recognizing powerful female masqueraders as influential spiritual leaders or figures of authority. Mostly, women participation in masquerade performance is on the level of spectator. They keep their distance and watch the *mmanwu* from afar. There are certain masquerades where women are allowed to operate as cheer ladies, intoning peculiar cheer songs at intervals during the performance and ready to find escape routes when the masquerade makes a chase.

### **Masquerade Festivals: Social and Economic Impact**

Masquerade festivals are major cultural events in Igbo society, drawing large crowds and offering significant economic opportunities. These festivals are a focal point for communal unity, where members of the village, diaspora, and visitors come together to celebrate their heritage. The festivals are marked by a display of colorful costumes, dances, music, and theatrical performances. These events also serve as platforms for promoting tourism, arts, and crafts, as artisans and performers showcase their skills.

The commercial aspect of masquerade festivals has grown in importance in recent years, with vendors selling traditional arts, food, clothing, and souvenirs. These festivals also attract tourists interested in experiencing authentic African cultural practices.

#### **Esoteric aspect of *mmanwu*: the Phenomenon of *Ogwu* in the Performance of Masquerade**

In Igbo culture, the concept of *Ogwu*—a term that broadly signifies spiritual power, influence, or potency—holds deep significance in various aspects of life, including the performance of masquerades (Ogbalu, 1979). *Ogwu* was employed in *mmanwu* institution to maintain and sustain that fearsome nature of the spirit. The Igbo adage says, *agwo emeghi ihe oji buru agwo umuaka ewere you kee nku*, (if the snake fails to show its power attribute, little kids will use it in tying firewood). The *Ogwu* is a vital force that imbues certain objects, people, or actions with supernatural power (Afigbo, 1981). In the context of masquerade performances, *Ogwu* is the spiritual energy that transforms an ordinary man into a visible manifestation of a spirit, ancestor, or deity (Nzimiro, 1985). This phenomenon elevates the masquerade from mere performance to a deeply sacred ritual that connects the living with the unseen forces that govern the world.

In its most basic form, *Ogwu* refers to a form of spiritual authority, energy, or force that is believed to be capable of influencing events, healing, protecting, or even punishing individuals (Ekechi, 1972). It can be understood as

the supernatural essence that powers the rituals, symbols, and performances within Igbo religion and ritual (Okonjo, 1976). The term *Ogwu* can be associated with charms, spells, or rituals that activate or unlock a particular spiritual potency, often sourced from the ancestral or divine world.

*Ogwu* can also refer to the particular power bestowed upon an individual or object during a *ritualistic* process, such as when a masquerader wears a mask or costume that has been potentized with *Ogwu* (Afigbo, 1981). This *Ogwu* is not simply a belief but is activated through the performance itself, making it a dynamic force that is continually enacted and renewed.

### **The Role of *Ogwu* in Masquerade Performances**

When it comes to masquerade performances in Igbo society, *Ogwu* plays a central role in transforming the masquerader into a vessel of divine or ancestral energy (Nzimiro, 1985). The masquerade is not just an artistic or theatrical display; it is a sacred event through which the masquerade channels and expresses the *Ogwu* of the spirit or deity they represent (Ogbalu, 1979).

Before the *mmanwu* assumes the role of a spirit or ancestor, there is often a ritual or preparatory stage where the individual undergoes a process of empowerment. This could involve spiritual cleansing, anointing with sacred oils, or the use of sacred words and incantations. During this ritual, the individual is believed to receive *Ogwu*, which activates their connection to the spiritual world. Once this spiritual energy is in place, the *mmanwu* becomes the physical embodiment of the spirit they represent. In this way, *Ogwu* empowers the performer, transforming them from a human being into a conduit for the divine or supernatural presence.

### **The activation of the Mask and Costume**

The mask and costume worn by the masquerader are also vessels of *Ogwu*. The mask, in particular, is considered a sacred object that holds the essence of the spirit it represents. Before it is worn, the mask undergoes a potentization process, often involving the invocation of spirits or gods to infuse it with *Ogwu*. This could involve ritual chanting, offerings, or sacrifices, and it is believed that the mask must be treated with reverence to maintain its spiritual potency.

Once empowered, the mask serves as both the physical and spiritual form of the being it represents. The masquerade, wearing the mask, is seen as channeling the power of that being, and their actions are interpreted as being guided or controlled by the spirit. The effectiveness and authenticity of the masquerade are therefore determined by the potency of the *Ogwu* present in the mask, costume, and the performer.

### **The Significance of *Ogwu* in the Dance and Performance**

During the masquerade performance, *Ogwu* is brought to life through movement, rhythm, and ritual. The masquerade's dance is not just a physical act; it is a spiritual performance in which the *mmanwu* "becomes" the spirit. The way the *mmanwu* moves, the energy they exhibit, and the interactions they have with the audience or troupe are seen as manifestations of the *Ogwu* that has infused them.

The dance movements may have specific symbolic meanings—representing the attributes of the spirit being embodied or reenacting key moments from the spirit's mythological narrative. The *mmanwu* might be seen as performing divine judgment, offering blessings, or providing protection to the community. In some cases, the masquerade may also engage in theatrical acts of purification or healing, with their movements and gestures believed to channel *Ogwu* that purifies or entices the people.

The *Ogwu* of the masquerade extends beyond the individual masquerade. It permeates the community and transforms the event into a collective spiritual experience. The presence of the masquerade is often a sign of divine protection and blessing. It is believed that the *mmanwu* that appears periodically brings good fortune, fertility, and prosperity to the community.

For the audience, the performance of the *mmanwu* is an encounter with the spiritual world. The community, particularly those who are initiated or well-versed in traditional beliefs, sees the masquerade as a physical manifestation of the spirits. The energy that radiates from the performer is seen as contagious, influencing the crowd and elevating the collective spiritual state of the community. In this sense, *mmanwu* is a sacred communal event that reaffirms the bond between the living and the ancestral or divine forces that govern the world.

### **The Sacred Power of *Ogwu* in Masquerades: Transformation and Protection**

At its core, the phenomenon of *Ogwu* in masquerade performances is about transformation—both of the individual and the community. *Mmanwu* undergoes a metaphysical change, becoming a medium for a spirit or deity that transcends their human form. This transformation is not just a physical one, but a deeply spiritual event where the masquerade aligns with forces beyond human comprehension.

The *Ogwu* in *mmanwu* also has a protective function. In Igbo spirituality, *mmanwu* are often called upon to perform rites that ward off evil, cleanse the land, and ensure the spiritual well-being of the people. For instance, during the annual *Mmanwu* festival, masqueraders might carry out ritualistic dances to chase away evil spirits, protect crops,

or ensure the prosperity of the village in the coming year. In this context, the masquerade becomes an act of spiritual warfare, where the power of *Ogwu* is used to safeguard the community from negative forces.

In many Igbo communities, *mmanwu* are not just performances but part of a larger initiation process into secret societies or spiritual groups. Individuals who participate in *mmanwu* performances, especially those who are initiated into *mmanwu* cults such as *Ekpe* or *Ijele*, are often endowed with *Ogwu* as a result of their initiation. This spiritual empowerment allows them to take on roles of authority, protect the sacred knowledge of the society, and act as intermediaries between the human and spiritual realms.

Initiates are trained in the esoteric knowledge of their society, learning the sacred chants, dances, and rituals that activate *Ogwu* in the performance. The power of *Ogwu* extends to the entire structure of these societies, giving them control over matters of justice, social order, and community welfare.

### **The Continuity and Evolution of *Ogwu* in Modern Igbo Masquerades**

As Igbo society evolves, so too does the role of *Ogwu* in masquerade performances. While the spiritual and ritualistic elements remain central to many traditional masquerades, modern expressions of masquerade culture may place more emphasis on entertainment, culture, tourism, and social events. However, even in these contexts, the essence of *Ogwu* still remains a central feature, as performers continue to channel ancestral or divine energy through their displays.

The modern masquerade often bridges the gap between tradition and innovation. Contemporary masqueraders might integrate new forms of technology, dance styles, and fashion into their performances, but the underlying belief in *Ogwu* as a spiritual force remains intact. This adaptation ensures the continued relevance of *mmanwu* in the face of changing cultural dynamics while preserving the core principles that have sustained Igbo spirituality for centuries.

### **Conclusion**

In the Igbo worldview, masquerades are far more than mere spectacles; they are powerful bridges between the physical and spiritual realms. As visible manifestations of invisible forces, masquerades embody the dynamic relationship between the living and the dead, the mortal and the divine. Through these performances, the Igbo affirm their connection to their ancestors, their gods, and the unseen world that shapes their lives.

In a society where spirituality permeates every facet of existence, masquerades serve as a reminder of the deep and unbroken link between the human world and the spirit world. Whether during a religious festival, an initiation, or a social event, masquerade continues to function as a visible spirit, offering both protection and guidance to the Igbo people.

In the performance of masquerades, *Ogwu* represents the unseen force that makes the spirit world tangible to the physical world. Through the power of *Ogwu*, *mmanwu* becomes a living vessel for the divine, connecting the community with ancestral wisdom, divine protection, and spiritual renewal. The phenomenon of *Ogwu* is central to the ritual and theatrical nature of Igbo masquerades, embodying the transformative power of the spiritual world and ensuring the continuity of Igbo cultural and religious practices across generations. Whether in traditional rural villages or urban centers, the phenomenon of *Ogwu* in masquerade performances continues to be a symbol of the indomitable connection between the living and the spirit world. It is a reminder of the sacred and mystical forces that shape Igbo life, guiding, protecting, and empowering individuals and communities.

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