

**THE HERITAGE RESOURCES OF AFIKPO
IN EBONYI STATE, NIGERIA:
A CASE STUDY OF MASQUERADING**

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Abstract. Festivals, agents of relaxation in Igboland, are celebrated to commemorate one important event or the other. Festivals have many facets such as *mmonwu* (masquerading), *Iri-ji* (new yam festival) and *mgba* (wrestling festivals). Masquerading is the main focus of this study and serves as one of the greatest festivals among the Igbo. In Afikpo, masquerading is classified into three, namely ‘*Iri Iko*’, ‘*Igwugwu*’ and *Okumkpo*. These masquerade festivals are remarkable with one type of activity or the other, with *Okumkpo* masquerade festival most prominent. The materials for this paper were collected under the principle of survey method from Ozizza, a town in Afikpo. The Afikpo clan is called the *Ehugbo* after their founder and the total population is approximately 156, 611 (2006 census) with land mass of 204km². The masquerade festivals aim to correct ills within the *Ehugbo* people of Afikpo. The question now borders on its relevance in this modern era considering the fact that the government has put in place various regulatory legal instruments for protecting human rights and curbing the ills of society. This work will show that the relevance of masquerading is not diminished by the modern imports.

Keywords: heritage resources, *Ehugbo*, Afikpo, masquerading

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1. Introduction

Whenever we mention masquerading in Igboland one immediately thinks of just the traditional religious ritual symbolism; yet it is far more than mere ritualism because it is also one of the channels through which many communities traditionally corrected some unwanted behavioural practices. Afikpo, formerly known as *Ehugbo* people, is settled at two localities: the upper undulating settlers (due to the basement rock) and the lower land settlers (the settlement that has proximity to

the lower shore of the cross-river flood-plain). The people are known for subsistent farming and they also engage in trading. Masquerading is vital in farming activities of the people. In this paper, the word masquerade or masquerading is to be differentiated from masking. Masking refers to costume (Boston 1960) and masquerade/masquerading concerns not only the costume, but also the religious-cultural significance and the plays involved. *Ehugbo* masquerades are classified into three types such as *Iri Iko*, *Igwugwu* and *Okumkpo*.

The three feature at different periods for different purposes. For instance, *Iri Iko* masquerade festival is a yearly seasonal festival, and the featuring masquerades are *Okpa*, *Yewelo* and *Otero*. It is a festival set aside to mark the commencement of dry season. *Igwugwu* festival is celebrated once in ten years (a decade), specifically in the month of November. It marks a religious festival that celebrates the maturation of young boys into manhood. Hence it orchestrates the rites of initiation into adulthood. *Okumkpo* is a periodic masquerade festival that is celebrated whenever the need for it arises. It showcases the festival of cleansing of the land of any form of abomination (*Nsoani*), which if left uncleansed is believed to have adverse effects on the economic, socio-religious and physical wellbeing of the members of the community. Conducts such as dangerous or blood-spilling fights or warfare, stealing, homicide, especially in the form of unwitting or accidental killing of a kinsperson, child abuse, rape, incest and robbery, among many others, are believed to heat up the land and need to be ritually atoned for, or calamities awaited the dwellers on the land until the necessary is done.

Among these three masquerade festivals, *Okumkpo* is most widely known and sought for in view of its great intervening, liberating and reconciling effects, and that is part of the reason why we decided to dwell more on it. This values of *Okumkpo* masquerading kept it relevant and persistent as a corrective measure in the *Ehugbo* community despite modern measures that are now put in place in line with western civilization. Hence even as the police, the judiciary and other law enforcement organs are put in place to protect human rights, the traditional festival is still held in high esteem by the people. *Okumkpo* masquerade can be compared with *mmanwu* (masquerade) festival in old Anambra State and which was later been celebrated in the new Anambra State. Since masquerade activities always coloured every important celebration among the Igbo in view of the belief that it represented the ancestors of the land witnessing the activities of their descendants, there is the move that festivals that showcase assemblage of masquerades should be gazetted by the government of South-east Nigeria to reflect the sum total of Igbo life, activities, beliefs, passions, theatre and tradition (Chiewe 1990). Ike (2012) in his study of unmasking the mask posits *mmanwu* in Igbo traditional society as an institution of unquestioned reverence. He further ascertained the mask as an inimitable agent of social order and court of final appeal. Therefore, the relevance of *Okumkpo* masquerade centres on the religious significance and social importance.

2. The meaning of masquerade

According to Onyeneke (1987) masquerade means different things to different people. Many see it as a representative of ritual symbolism, some as a representative of empirical symbolism and to some others is an illusion. As a ritual symbolism, it is defined as an intermediary between the living and the dead. Libation becomes the channel of communication for the two worlds (of the dead and living), and the visitation of masquerades signify the rapport in the communication (Onyeneke (1987). Better still on ritualism, Turner (1967) defined it as a prescribed formal behaviour for non-technological occasion, indicating beliefs in mystical beings or power. As a representative of an empirical symbol, it is for tourist attraction. This group believes that masquerading is for show where masks, images, shapes, dance, chants and song are expressed to enhance tourism. As an illusion, it centres on make-up, i.e. costume, which stands for art. Masquerade's sensory display is on its bodily coverage. Some participants in Igboland covered their entire body with locally made fibre, leaves, skin or metal while others half-covered their body, so that the hands and legs were exposed.

The *Okumkpo* masquerade embodies three areas such as ritualism, empirical symbolism and illusion. In the area of ritualism, it is believed by our informants that they are spirits emanating from the spiritual world periodically to cleanse the land against the impending doom awaiting its inhabitants due to some evil committed in the area as often signalled by some negative omen. In its empirical symbolism it stands as avenue to showcase tourism. During the masquerading period people from far and near Afikpo gather to watch the masquerade display at the village square of Ozizza. Even as no fare is charged or collected from the spectators, through the customary charity of the people local dishes and wine are served, and people in attendance freely eat and drink to their satisfaction. At the end it exudes the aura and awe characteristic of supernatural beings.

3. Okumkpo festival

Okumkpo came into existence in 1942. Subsequent events took place in 1966, 1979 and 1993. The last *Okumkpo* featured in October 2012 according to oral information. What is *Okumkpo*? Traditionally, *Okumkpo* means 'bad omen'. Issues occasioning it include: dangerous fighting, armed robbery, killing or stealing of peeled yams freely planted in the farms, child abuse, rape, incest and robbery. In further clarification, *Okumkpo* is referred to as *Oko* or *Okokpu* – avenue through which people were buried alive in the olden days at designated evil places such as 'Amaechara, Okokpum, Amuro and Mgbom' as a result of an evil deed or other. *Okumkpo*, therefore, is a re-enactment of the ages-long practice in modern setting.

It showcases how evils in the environment were traditionally judged and addressed. An *Okumkpo* festival, according to oral tradition is not a demonic festival as some wrongly believed with the influence of Christianity, but a sort of

sacramental prototype of the occurrences that took place in the past. It is an outward sign of the inward grace that projects and manifests people's nostalgic culture and traditions. Nevertheless, the event of *Okumkpo* starts with *Olojo* masquerades – a sort of master of ceremony (M.C) masquerades that introduce the entry of *Okumkpo* by dancing, chanting (songs) and acrobatically usher in the gigantic and dreadful masquerade into the arena (*amikpo* square) in Ozizza, in the Ehugbo community the area of our study. Before the appearance of *Okumkpo*, *Amikpo* square must be filled with the audience, consisting of the old, young and visitors from far and near Afikpo and environs, as well as elders of the sub-Ozizza village communities. All were seated to watch *Okumkpo* featuring. The occasion ordinarily commenced with the dance performance of two very important masquerades called *Nnade* and *Ologo Okumkpo* that open the day. Their duty is to welcome the spectators and greet, in a special way, the elders who are seated among the audience. They are regarded as kings of the masquerades. They take permission from the gods and deities of the land before the commencement of the festival. This vital function must be performed by them (*Nnade* and *Ologo*), otherwise the *Okumkpo* festival cannot commence.

The physical characteristic of the king is demonstrated by putting on a cap made of *Pandanus* leaves or of coconut leaves and decorated with different colourful objects. They also hold a staff of office and are carrying different kinds of objects on their back. It is these objects that signify the 'bad omen' which needs to be addressed with cleansing in order to be disposed of. Moreover, for *Okumkpo* festival to be a success, about two thousand masquerading youths must be dressed and seated on the ground. *Nnade Okumkpo* will summon these masquerades-like youths to hold their brooms in their hand and begin to chant a song while sitting on the ground, led by *Nnade Okumkpo*. An introductory song by *Nnade Okumkpo* marks the traditional beginning of *Okumkpo* festival. Youth masquerades constitute a manifestation of the festival's aims and objectives. The *Okumkpo* displays *Osha/Uyo* musical instruments, tied to the legs, and beads on the neck, as it chants and demonstrates round the *Amikpo* square. It is during this display that the cleansing of the land of the causes of the 'bad omen' is done. The youth-masquerades would follow the king masquerades like the *Nnade Okumkpo* masquerade to hit their brooms on the ground and exclaim "behold the abominations occasioning the 'bad omen' are cleansed".

Horris, *Odawa* and mother masquerades, apart from father *Nnade* and *Ologo*, are other types of masquerades that always perform during *Okumkpo* masquerading. *Horris* masquerades are children/sons of both father *Nnade* and the mother masquerades. *Odawa Okumkpo* is the leader of *Odawa* masquerades featuring to support the activities of *Okumkpo*. Doctor masquerade masking was also instituted to treat any emergency that occurred. The doctor masquerade must be beckoned by the mother masquerade to cure her *Horris Okumkpo* (sons). Doctor *Okumkpo* must receive his fares after treatment by mother *Okumkpo*. In the final analysis of the display of *Okumkpo*, a demonstration must take place to mark the end of the celebration. The last event is keeping of an earthen vessel (pottery product) on the

ground. *Okumkpo* then asks the spectators, if they can lift the pot. Lifting the pot calls for wisdom, courage and strength. Who lifts up the pot would be declared the winner of the festival.

4. Relevance of *Okumkpo* masquerade

The *Okumkpo masquerade* in Ozizza, Afikpo focuses on two major areas: social and religious significance. On the social importance, *Okumkpo* masquerade is an interactive masquerade that is didactic, and displays wisdom and courage. At the beginning of the celebration, immediately the *Okumkpo* enters the *Amikpo* square, the first question it would ask the spectators would be ‘can we proceed with the celebration’? Enekwe (1987) collaborated with the data obtained from elders that the spectators would shout *Yaah! Yaah! Yaah!* Meaning, yes! If *Yaah* sounds once, *Okumkpo* asks the same question a second time. Mr Inyia, one of our informants, said that the second chorus would be three times, and immediately the atmosphere would change for joyous celebration. The final remark that would bring the ceremony to an end is the question regarding the lifting of the clay pot.

In line with Ike’s view, *Okumkpo* is a *mmanwu* in Afikpo which possesses therein unquestioned reverence, portraying Afikpo identity and preserving Igbo ideology. *Mmanwu* also offers the tourists a valuable source of entertainment (Okpoko and Okonkwo 2004). *Okumkpo* does not reflect the entire Afikpo culture, but depicts only the negative aspects of life that call for redress (Ikegwu 2014). This, therefore, helps to curtail bad activities in Ozizza, Afikpo. In line with this, one hardly hears about stealing, armed robbery, kidnapping and other vices common in most communities of the Ozizza people. *Okumkpo* masquerading instils fear; hence, kindness and decency in behaviour are still present in the area. For instance, one can park one’s car outside overnight for days, and still find it exactly where it was parked. Strangers are not frightened by any event, because hospitality is maintained. Love, peace, hard work and hospitality are marks of the people of Ozizza in Afikpo, i.e. the Ehugbo people.

On its social importance, *Okumkpo* constitutes a vehicle of mobilization. Mobilization in this case simply means organizing people into achieving a goal. Better still, it is an attitude of the mind, that is, a “conscious expression of the belief that it is within the power of a people to organize, co-ordinate and control their human and material resources for the attainment of an internally generated and self-reliant socio-economic development (Ome 1994). Okoli (1987) sees mobilization as something that anchors on the idea within the power of man to create the necessary conditions for his social, cultural, economic and political development, that it is within his power to control his environment and that he has not only the ability but the inherent right to do so. The place of *Okumkpo* as a mobilizing framework is on the side of maintenance of law and order within the communities in Afikpo, based on the volition from moral conviction rather than through the coercive and punitive effects of the civil law. The intervention of

Okumkpo is akin to the modern legislative and judicial instruments, such that through the use of masking, the rich cultural legacy from the ancestors is restored and the cleansing effect of offence and punishment are more profitably addressed.

On its tourist feature, the *Okumkpo* masquerade in Afikpo does not exhibit violence and aggression, rather it stabilizes the community. It provides the bond as every community must gather to watch the event. It also encourages friendship in the area of communal eating and drinking which still persists. Environmental cleanliness is also highlighted during the festivals especially in the village square and parts/road leading to the square. Again, *Okumkpo* masquerades provide entertainment. Chants of song and dance are veritable forms of art and also involve lots of artistic pleasure (Onyeneke 1987). The *Nnadi Okumkpo*, one of those who station themselves as police officers, entertains the audience by keeping the law, making sure that orderliness was maintained in the square.

The chants, either audible or not, are forms of Igbo poetry (Ugonna 1985 and Egundu 1971). It is this spontaneous recognition of art display in costume, chants and dance that attract tourism. The village square for the performance resembles an open air theatre coordinating three facets of activities such as interaction of all the *Okumkpo* performing, the audience and the performance itself. Therefore, during the time when *Okumkpo* occurs at the village square, entertainments abound as everybody keenly watches the display. This enhances deep social process of the community such as socialization of the youths, contact for marriage alliance and other opportunities.

5. Religious significance

Okumkpo masquerade, although not strictly an object of religious worship (as no Ehugbo person worships or venerates it), focuses on the spiritual powers of the *Okumkpo*. The spirituality is found in the disguise of the costume and display. The display presents a spirit no matter what the character of the spirit may be (Onyeneke 1987). Oral tradition believes that all masquerades are spirits and spirits are mystical. It is the mystical character found in the display and costume of the *Okumkpo* that chiefly characterizes the religious elements in the masquerading. *Okumkpo* does not kill or execute the offender but the aura and awe permeate deep in the mind of the people regarding what it can cleanse on the basis of the traditional religious beliefs in the need for atonement and cleansing for atrocities to be absolved and the land healed for prosperity.

6. *Okumkpo* as prototype of criminal justice

As a law enforcement agent, *Okumkpo* is likened to the Nigeria Police Force designated by the constitution to police the country. This is encapsulated in section 23 of the Police Act which authorizes them to fight crime and criminality.

Okumkpo masquerade like the Police Force of the nation has the authority to stop negative practices committed by people, such as killing and child molestation. These practices are against the law. Therefore *Okumkpo* masquerade helps to maintain social order in Afikpo. Likewise, the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence corps (NSCDC) is a paramilitary that was established in 2003 by the Federal Republic of Nigeria, with the Act of the National Assembly. The act was amended in 2007, to enhance the statutory duties of the corp.

The statutory duties primarily include protecting the lives and properties in conjunction with Nigerian police. Others are: to protect pipelines from vandalism, get involved in crisis resolutions and protect the country (THISDAY LIVE 2014, Vanguard News 2014 and New Telegraph 2014). *Okumkpo* masquerade when associated with NSCDC is an agent of regulation. Fighting is against the Ehugbo way of life. Therefore, *Okumkpo* masquerade cleanses the menace of open combat which, when allowed to continue, can lead to murder. Hence, *Okumkpo* masquerade helps to maintain peace and harmony like the modern civil defence in the country. *Okumkpo* masquerade also settles social vices such as stealing, and apportions punishment to the offenders, thereby serving as an agent of social justice system just like the courts, during featuring. When found out, the culprit must either go to exile or change character for better life. The committed crime must be settled in a traditional way. *Okumkpo* masquerade only stands as a court injunction, cleansing the taboo so that the profane land may be made sacred once more. This is court in action. Finally, *Okumkpo* masquerade in connection to human rights stands as the channel for protecting the rights of Ehugbo people. *Okumkpo* masquerade does not have the power to either execute or kill any culprit. *Okumkpo's* duty is to cleanse any evil committed. No matter the weight of the offence *Okumkpo* only highlights the evil and cleanses it so that abuses are averted.

7. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that *Okumkpo* masquerade is still relevant among the indigenes of Afikpo despite the fact that modern government has other means of social control. As agent for moral rectitude and social change, masquerading in Afikpo is intertwined with their cultural fabrics, having the power to control the religious and social psyche of their people. It, however, has no conflict with the established policing, since the essence of peace and tranquillity in a society are the ingredients of social control. The religiosity of the people and their socio-cultural beliefs cannot be changed with the imports of modern ways as they still value what they have without being at loggerheads with the established social structures within the society.

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