



Exploring the Metaphysical Significance of Muonwu in Igbo-African Culture and its Relevance to Church Inculturation: A Philosophical Analysis

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Abstract

This study investigates the metaphysical/spiritual connotations as well as the functionality of masquerades in Igbo-African cultural context and the stance of the Church in integrating masquerading into the Christian religion. Masquerade could be anything that completely or partially hide the identity of the individual person wearing it. It is mainly for entertainments. Hence, it is for social matters and has nothing spiritual or metaphysical about it. Masquerade in this understanding includes what thieves used in covering their faces, or by some security personnels. However, muonwu denotes in Igbo-African milieu, the ancestors manifesting in the physical world as a way of demonstrating that they are not annihilated but are now in another realm over and above the empirical physical world. Hence, muonwu is both metaphysical and has many spiritual implications and connotations about it. Obviously, "Inculturation," the integration of indigenous cultural practices into a religion, should not be approached recklessly or carelessly. The author finally concluded that the church should typically approaches inculturation with caution and consideration, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the cultural elements being incorporated prior to proceeding.

Keywords: Masquerade, Metaphysical significance, Igbo-African culture, Functionality of masquerades, Church inculturation.

Introduction

A masquerade is a type of costume or disguise that is used to hide the identity of an individual. It can be a complete or partial covering of the face. Grau argues that masks can create a paradox by both revealing and concealing the true identity of the performer, leading to a disruption of the traditional relationship between performer and audience.¹ Masquerade can be used for entertainment purposes or for more practical reasons such as settlement of serious cases and or provision of security. The term is widely used in social gatherings, where people wear masks to add an element of mystery and excitement to the event. In line with the above, Manfredini examines in Venetian community the role of the mask as including its use in festivals and carnivals, as well as its connection to the city's theatrical traditions.² Nevertheless, in Igbo-African milieu for instance the mask is not only used as a form of disguise, but also as a symbol of mystery and transformation.

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However, masquerade is not limited to just social gatherings. It has also been used in different cultures throughout history, such as the Venetian carnivals in Italy, where people would wear elaborate masks to conceal their identities. Masquerade has become an integral part of many cultural celebrations and is considered to be a form of art, with intricate designs and elaborate details added to the masks. It is not just any clothing material that is used in masquerading. The type of material and the painting has both cultural and spiritual significance. Hence, Eicher argues that dress is an important aspect of cultural identity, reflecting both individual and collective beliefs, attitudes, and values.⁴ The Igbo translation of Masquerade is "ulaga" makana ulaga hu muonwu o wara oso (implying that when an ordinary Masquerade encounters a genuine spirit Masquerade, the ordinary Masquer will undoubtedly take flight.⁵ In African cultures, particularly in the Igbo milieu, masquerade takes on a deeper and more significant meaning.

The Metaphysical Significance of Muonwu among the Igbo People

The term "muonwu" or "mmowu" refers to the manifestation of ancestors in the physical world, demonstrating that they are not annihilated, but exist in another realm beyond the empirical physical world. This concept has many spiritual implications and is deeply rooted in the beliefs and traditions of the Igbo people. Ikonne in "The Igbo Ancestor in African and African-American Literature: A Study in Cultural Continuity" demonstrates how the Igbo ancestor is portrayed as a source of wisdom, guidance, and protection, and how this representation is used to transmit cultural values and beliefs from one generation to the next.⁶ Muonwu is derived from the words "muo," meaning spirit, and "onwu," meaning death, and refers to the spirits of the ancestors who were believed to visit the living in physical form. The ancient Igbo people held this belief strongly and saw muonwu as a way for the spirits of the dead to inspect the lives of their living relatives. Ancestors are highly significant in African beliefs, as they are believed to have the power to influence the lives of the living and to provide guidance, protection, and support from the afterlife.⁷

Muonwu is performed in traditional celebrations and rituals, and is considered to be a way of honoring the ancestors and keeping their spirits alive. The masks used in muonwu are often

intricate and beautifully crafted, with symbols and motifs that are significant to the Igbo culture. These masks are worn by performers, who are considered to be the physical embodiment of the ancestors, and their movements and gestures are believed to be guided by the spirits of the ancestors. In maintaining the connection between the living and the dead and in honoring the ancestors, rituals and ceremonies play a vital role.⁸

Masquerade is an integral part of traditional Igbo religious practices and it has been adapted to changing cultural and religious contexts over time. It is a powerful symbol of the presence of the spiritual realm in the physical world and serves as a means of communicating with the gods and ancestors.⁹

Invariably, it is evident that masquerade and muonwu have different meanings and purposes. While masquerade is primarily used for entertainment or practical reasons, muonwu is a deeply spiritual and significant tradition in the Igbo culture. The masks used in muonwu are not just disguises, but are symbols of the connection between the physical and spiritual realms. They represent the manifestation of the ancestors and their continued presence in the lives of their descendants.

In comparison, masquerade is a more superficial form of disguise, with little or no spiritual or cultural significance. While both forms of disguise have their own unique purposes and significance, it is important to understand the differences and appreciate the cultural and spiritual significance of traditions like muonwu in Igbo-African cultures. It is in this regard that Echeruo's article, "The Igbo and their neighbors: Culture and history in the southeastern Nigeria," emphasizes the rich cultural heritage of southeastern Nigeria and the complex interactions between different groups in the region.¹⁰

The Role of masquerades in Igbo Culture

It is very important to note that there is a big difference between ordinary Masquerade and muonwu or mmowu (spirit masquer) in Igbo-African cultural context. The word as affirmed above, is a combination of Igbo two words: "muo" meaning spirit, and "onwu" meaning death. Hence, muonwu implies the spirit of the dead. The Igbo in those good olden days strongly believed that muonwu is the spirits of the ancestors manifesting in physical form to inspect the affairs of the living relatives.

Masquerade played an important role in the administration of justice in the past. The use of masquerade traditions in Igboland served as a tool to uphold societal norms and administer justice. There is no denying that masquerade played a crucial role in maintaining social stability and settling disputes in pre-colonial times, and it continues to hold significant cultural and social significance in the area even today. However, these functions have been taken over by security personnels and the judiciary in the present Igbo society.¹¹ In fact, the use of masquerade to enforce justice dates back to ancient times when the spirits of the ancestors were believed to manifest themselves in physical form to inspect the affairs of the living.

However, in the present day, the role of masquerade in the administration of justice has become almost obsolete. The responsibility of maintaining law and order has been taken over by security personnel and the judiciary.

While the role of masquerade in administering justice has diminished over time, it continues to hold cultural significance and serve as a form of entertainment in some societies. Masquerade has been a major source of entertainment in social gatherings and festivals for centuries even to the present time. Hence, it is important to note that masquerade still holds cultural significance in some societies and is used as a form of entertainment.

In this study there may not be much room to delve deeper into the cultural and political importance of masquerade traditions in Igboland. Undeniably, these masquerade traditions have been employed to preserve cultural identity and reinforce community principles. Admittedly, Nzegwu maintains that masquerade traditions hold great sway as a means of cultural expression and can have a significant impact on political and social perspectives.¹² Masquerade traditions in different African societies also performs the role of mediating social relations, resolving conflicts, marking transitions in the life cycle, and reinforcing community bonds.¹³

The Igbo masquerade is not simply a form of entertainment, but a sophisticated art form that reflects the cultural, social, and political realities of the Igbo people. Nevertheless, masquerade has changed over time, both in response to changes in society and as a result of external cultural influences.¹⁴

More so, there is a gender dimensions of the Igbo masquerade. The performances and costumes

reinforce and subvert traditional gender roles. Invariably, there is a necessary relationship between the masquerade and the broader cultural, political, and economic context in which it operates. Equally, the Igbo people have through the instrumentality of masquerades contested and resisted dominant power structures.¹⁴ Masquerade traditions often serve as a means of asserting power and control within African societies, both by reinforcing existing social hierarchies and by challenging and subverting them.¹⁶

The distinction between masquerade and muonwu is crucial in understanding the cultural and historical context of these traditions.

Relevance of Masquerade to Church Inculturation

In the 19th century, the advent of Christianity in Nigeria brought about a substantial shift in the nation's religious outlook. A considerable number of Nigerians embraced Christianity, leading to the rise of the Church's impact in the country. Nonetheless, African indigenous religious customs and convictions remained a crucial aspect of many Nigerians' lives.

Thus, there has been a considerable interaction between African traditional religion and Christianity in Nigeria. On one hand, some aspects of African traditional religion have been blended into Christian worship and rituals, while on the other hand, the Church has attempted to eliminate African traditional religious customs and beliefs. This interaction has often caused conflict and friction, as each side strives to assert its authority over the other.

The process of inculturation involves embedding the gospel deeply within a specific cultural group or population. This is vital for the successful dissemination of the gospel in Africa and the formation of an authentic African Christian identity. Obviously, there is intricate relationship between culture and religion, hence the significance of appreciating and accommodating local cultures in the realm of missionary work. However, inculturation involves many difficulties which include opposition from both African and non-African communities, as well as the requirement to strike a balance between maintaining cultural heritage and upholding gospel principles.¹⁷

Through the instrumentality of inculturation Christianity adapts to the local cultural context in which it is being practiced. In the context of African Christianity, inculturation has played a

significant role in helping to make the religion more relevant and accessible to the African people. Inculturation is crucial for African Christianity because it allows for the preservation of African cultural identity and values within the context of Christian worship and practice. There is, therefore the need to also highlight the importance of inculturation in addressing the cultural gap between African people and the Western-influenced form of Christianity that was imposed on the continent during colonialism. Having considered the aforementioned points, inculturation is a necessary and ongoing process that must be embraced by African Christians in order to ensure the continued relevance and growth of the religion in the region.¹⁸

However, inculturation, the process of integrating indigenous cultural practices into a religion, is not such a thing that can be hastily and haphazardly meddled into. Undoubtedly, inculturation is a complex process that requires careful consideration of the cultural context in which it is taking place. There are many challenges faced in inculturation. These challenges include the risk of syncretism, cultural imperialism, and the loss of cultural identity.¹⁹ the church is known to approach inculturation with caution and care, requiring a thorough understanding of the cultural elements being integrated before proceeding.

Again, to inculturate what the church is not fully in control of or in charge is very dangerous. There are many more reasons why the church should be very careful in dealing with masquerading (muonwu). First, I have never seen any Masquerade in Igbo cultural milieu chasing people into a shrine or environs. But Masquerade can chase people into a church building with abandoned recklessness. Secondly, Masquerade can never pass any shrines without bowing very low and pouring out praise names to the idol in question. But Masquerade can pass across a church free care attitude. Thirdly, look around your Village and tell how many of these young men who are interested in Masquerading, that are still serious with their faith. The above points and other reasons will surely open one's eyes to agree with the author that masquerading in the Igbo-African context of it is more than just what ordinary eyes can see.

In traditional Igbo culture, the belief in the muonwu is a central aspect of their spiritual beliefs and practices. The term "muonwu" refers to the spirit of the deceased, which is believed to take physical form and observe the actions of their

living relatives. This belief is steeped in pagan rituals and customs, often involving malevolent forces. Therefore, muonwu cult as an institution is deeply rooted in the pagan cultism and magical manipulation that involves a great deal of diabolical influence.

The concept of inculturation, or the integration of indigenous cultural practices into a religion, is a complex process that should not be taken lightly. In the case of the muonwu cult, the church has approached the integration of this cultural element with caution and care. The church recognizes the importance of thoroughly understanding the cultural elements being integrated before proceeding. This requires a deep and nuanced understanding of the cultural beliefs, practices, and rituals associated with the muonwu. The church recognizes that these cultural elements are deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of the Igbo people, and that their integration into the Christian faith must be done with respect and sensitivity.

The church also recognizes the potential for cultural appropriation and the importance of maintaining the cultural integrity of the Igbo people. To this end, the church engages in a dialogue with the community, seeking to understand their cultural beliefs and practices and to ensure that the integration of the muonwu into the Christian faith is done in a way that is respectful and meaningful to the community and without affecting the sensibility of the Christians.²⁰

Evaluation and conclusion

1. Evaluation

The issue of inculturation in the Church and its relationship with masquerade is a complex and sensitive one that requires careful consideration. This is because the Church is not always in control of, or in charge of, every aspect of the cultural practices and traditions that exist in its community. In this regard, it is important for the Church to be cautious in its dealings with masquerade, as there are many reasons why this is so.

Firstly, masquerade is not always respectful towards the Church. While it is not uncommon to see masquerade chasing people into a shrine in the Igbo cultural milieu, it is less common to see masquerade doing the same in a church building. This shows a disregard for the religious beliefs and values of the Church, and it is important for the Church to be aware of this when engaging with masquerade.

Secondly, the attitude of masquerade towards other religious beliefs is often very different. For example, masquerade will often bow very low and pour out praise names to an idol in a shrine, but it may pass a church without showing any respect. This highlights the different attitudes that masquerade has towards different religious beliefs, and the Church should be mindful of this when engaging with it.

Again, it is important to consider the impact of masquerade on young people who are interested in it. While many young men are interested in masquerade, it is important to ask how many of them are still serious about their faith. This highlights the need for the Church to be cautious in its dealings with masquerade, as it can have a negative impact on the faith of young people.

The increasing popularity of masquerading amongst young people has led to a concerning trend in deviant and manipulative behavior. These young individuals, who are often highly enthusiastic about masquerading, are causing significant harm to both their own families and their communities. Their behavior is disruptive and destructive, and they are becoming a serious problem for society as a whole. The significance role of masquerade in maintaining cultural heritage and tradition and its ability to foster a strong cultural identity cannot be stressed enough. However, it is also important to acknowledge the negative aspects of masquerade, such as its encouragement of deviant behavior, its exposure of young people to violence, and its promotion of superstition and cultural conservatism. Hence, a balanced approach to promoting masquerade culture in Nigeria is necessary, one that recognizes its cultural importance while addressing its negative impacts on the youth.²¹

One of the key issues that is contributing to this trend is the ease with which young people can access information about masquerading online. This has led to an increase in the number of individuals who are seeking to become involved in the activity, and has also resulted in the spread of misinformation and dangerous practices. In many cases, young people are being exposed to extreme or violent forms of masquerading, which are having a negative impact on their behaviour and attitudes.

In addition to this, there is also a growing sense of entitlement amongst young people when it comes to masquerading. Many feel that they have the right to engage in the activity regardless of the consequences, and are not willing to listen to the

advice of others or consider the feelings of those around them. This sense of entitlement is leading to increasingly aggressive and selfish behavior, which is having a devastating effect on the community as a whole.

The effects of this trend are far-reaching and can be seen in a number of different areas. For example, families and communities are being torn apart by the negative behaviour of these young people, and there is a growing sense of hopelessness and frustration amongst those who are trying to help. Additionally, many young people are finding themselves involved in criminal activities, either directly or indirectly, as a result of their involvement in masquerading.

To address this growing problem, it is important that society takes a comprehensive approach to addressing the issues that are driving this trend. This might involve educating young people about the dangers and consequences of masquerading, providing support and resources to those who are struggling with the activity, and increasing public awareness about the issue. Additionally, it may also be necessary to take a more proactive approach to preventing young people from becoming involved in masquerading in the first place, by improving access to educational and employment opportunities, and addressing the underlying social and economic issues that are contributing to the problem.

Finally, the trend of young people resorting to diabolic manipulative behavior and tendency as a result of their interest in masquerading is a serious issue that requires immediate attention. By working together and taking a comprehensive approach, we can help to reduce the negative impacts of this trend and create a safer and more supportive society for everyone.

2. Conclusion

In conclusion, the relationship between the Church and masquerade in the Igbo cultural milieu is complex and sensitive, and the Church should be cautious in its dealings with masquerade. The points discussed above, and others, serve to highlight the need for the Church to be aware of the many reasons why this is so, and to approach this relationship with caution and sensitivity.

The reality is that these masquerade events as we have these days, do not bring any long-term benefits or positive impacts. Instead, they are causing harm to the environment and perpetuating a culture of waste as can be observed in many villages and towns.

Therefore, the popularity of masquerade events among young people is not as innocent as it may seem. The reality is that it is causing harm to the environment and perpetuating a culture of waste. It is imperative that society takes action to address this issue and promote a more sustainable and environmentally-friendly approach to masquerade events.

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