

The Demise of the Performance Art of Masquerade: A Case Study of the Phenomenon in Igbogene in Bayelsa State

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ABSTRACT The Demise of the Performance Art of Masquerade: A Case Study of the Phenomenon in Igbogene in Bayelsa State is a study of the now extinct performance idiom of masquerade among the Igbogene people. The paper outlines the origin of masquerade in Igbogene. It looks at its organisational structure, pays attention to the functions of masquerade as well its classification. The paper also appreciates the staging of masquerade, but it is critical of the factors that contributed to the demise of the phenomenon on the arrival of the Christian missions in the community. It grapples with a number of such factors, suggesting that missionary misdirected zeal, lack of cultural education, as well as the coercive nature of the masquerade organisation are principal factors in the demise of the art of masquerade in course of its relationship with Christianity. The paper is convinced that in order to forestall crisis in the Niger Delta there should deliberate attempts in forging joint cultural endeavours among communities the kind that existed between Igbogene and Elebele, and between the Epie and Engenni using Igbogene as a representative community.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars in Nigeria are divided in their appreciation of the missionary enterprise as it affects the cultural development of the country. A school of thought blames the demise of all cultural institutions in the country on the missionary adventure in the country. That school of thought even misconceives the goal behind the missions' involvement in drama and theatre in its early days in Nigeria. Gbilekaa is a very vociferous voice in this vein. He considers the involvement of the missionaries in theatrical productions from purely mercenary considerations. He posits: "it is important to note that the missionaries through their doctrinal and pedagogical entertainments were diligently conditioning the African mind and taste towards the European vision of life. Literature, in fact theatre, was considered as a necessary tool for civilising and humanising Africans" (Gbilekaa 1997: iv). Among scholars who consider the positive influence of the missions on the cultural development of Nigeria Biodun Jeyifo and Michael Echeruo are prominent names to cite. According to Jeyifo (1984: 42) the Christian Missions showed interest in drama which affected the development of drama and theatre later in the country. The church through some of its officials and priests encouraged and supported several theatrical productions. Echerou (1981: 357) corroborates Jeyifo's position and notes the

existence of theatrical activities in the church from the inception of the missionary enterprise in Nigeria. We have in an earlier work, "Precursors of Modern Drama and Theatre in Nigeria" in *Foot Prints of our Ancestors* (1998: 45-54), traced the growth of Christian Drama and Theatre in Nigeria from the time of its inception to the period before 1970. In that work we have noted the degree of involvement of some of the Christian missions in the development of drama and theatre in Nigeria. Despite the encouraging signs we have noted in some areas, the fact remains that some of the missions either because of zeal or ignorance actually contributed in working actively in destroying some cultural institutions in their areas of operation. The demise of the performance art of masquerade among the Igbogene people of Epie Land in Bayelsa State in Nigeria is one such example we shall examine in this paper. Before we consider the factors that contributed to the demise of the art, we shall first of all look at the origin and development of the art, types of masquerades, its history, its functions, social relevance and significance among the people, the organization of masquerade and the staging of masquerade. This paper is based on the synthesis of oral information supplied by three local historians as well as performing artists Chiefs Job Epem and Jeremiah Ekwems and Madam Rachel Ezekiel in 1979.

Igbogene is one of the fastest growing towns

in Bayelsa State of Nigeria. (James 1997: 7). The people are Epie (Sorgwe 2000: 3), an Edoid group in the Central Niger Delta (Alagoa, 2004:2). They speak the Epie language which Efere and Williamson (1999: 102) and Williamson (2004:12) classify as Delta Edoid. The community is situated in the Niger Delta. It is in the fresh water area of Bayelsa State, a state in the South-south geopolitical zone in Nigeria. Igbogene is bounded on the West by Gbaran, in the Yenaoga Local Government Area, on the East by Akiogbolobo in Ahoada West Local Government Area in Rivers State, on the South by Yenegwe in Yenagoa Local Government Council and on the North by Mbiama in Ahoada West Local Government Area in Rivers State. Igbogene is about seventy-five kilometres from Port Harcourt the capital of the Rivers State and about thirty kilometres from Yenagoa the capital city of Bayelsa State. It is an oil producing town.

ORIGIN OF THE DEVELOPMENT MASQUERADE IN EPIE

The people of Igbogene did not originate the concept of masquerade. Masquerade came to Igbogene from Kalabari and Ibo land. The testimony to this effect could be seen in the language in which the masquerade songs were sung. Masquerade might have come from these areas to Epie land as early as the middle of the 18th century. Masquerade did not come to Igbogene from Kalabari and Ibo land only. Another group of masquerades came from Elebele, a town in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. Kalabari masquerade did not come to Igbogene directly from the Kalabari; rather, it was from Igbogene's immediate neighbour the Engenni that they came in contact with Kalabari masquerades. It is a cultural practice among many tribal groups in Nigeria for people to learn artistic modes of expression like dances, masquerades and music from other groups assimilate them and make it theirs. It is like the contemporary practice in musicians performing and rearranging other people's works and performing them in their own way.

The masquerade tradition which developed in Igbogene was an amalgamation of the masquerade customs of various places from which masquerades had come to Igbogene. So, the totality of Igbogene masquerade was a synthesis of the various elements of masquerade they had

learnt from these areas. From the synthesis of the various masquerade traditions the people eventually evolved their own unique character of presentation that could be seen to be characteristic of them

There were two generations of masquerade in Igbogene. The first generation of masquerade comprise Kalabari, Ibo masquerades and Igbogene innovation. The second generation of masquerade however, included Elebele masquerades and masquerades created by artist from Igbogene. By this time the people had not only imbibed a performance idiom from other tribal groups, but they had come to understand the medium so that they could now create works to reflect their new understanding, and appreciation of the idiom. The two generations of masquerades overlap, so, one cannot draw a line of demarcation to delineate between them. Be that as it may, it is however known that at a point in time which, due to lack of written records, is not known the Kalabari and Ibo masquerades generally known as *Owuovie* were dropped, and Elebele and Igbogene masquerades which were generally called *Owukpolom* became the only existing ones. One of the sources the writer interviewed while collecting the information which is part of this paper lived during the periods both generations of masquerades existed, so was able to differentiate the characteristics of one generation of masquerade from the other. But two other sources who did not witness the period of the existence of the first generation of masquerades *Owuvie* could only attest to the work and functions of the second generation of masquerade *Owukpolom*.

The basic difference which existed between the two generations of masquerades was in the way artists were admitted into the masquerade guild. During the dispensation of *Owuvie*, that is, the first generation of masquerade, artists were usually initiated into the masquerade cult. This practice however was dropped during the period of the second generation masquerades known as *Owukpolom*. From this point onwards the entertainment value of the performance idiom took prominence over its ritual essence. It was no longer necessary to initiate people into the masquerade cult before they could participate in its performance. The art of masquerade performance then assumed a more social role than the spiritual hold it commanded among the people. Before the transformation took place it was necessary for the initiation to take place so that the people could

preserve the rites of the cult and keep them in tact. Seen from the perspective of the coercive force masquerade welded among the people the issue of secrecy that necessitated the initiation became obvious.

Prior to the advent of masquerade in Igbogene Epie, however, there was a secret cult called *Igbele*. Only males were eligible to be initiated into it. A male indigene could only be considered ripe to be initiated into *Igbele* when he had married at least his first wife, and had climbed a palm tree. An *Igbele* initiate was free from the molestation of masquerade. He was entitled to all rights and privileges anybody in the town was supposed to have like; owing land, and having a fair share of fishes killed during any fishing festival among other rights and privileges.

With the advent of masquerade, the masquerade cult was incorporated into the *Igbele* cult. The *Igbele* priest was responsible for initiating people into the masquerade cult. This was a native innovation that was infused into the masquerade phenomenon in Igbogene. To be free from masquerade molestation, grown up males had to pass through the ordeal of initiation. The initiation ordeal had a festive tempo. It was serious however, and could culminate into inter-family fights. This was how people were initiated into the masquerade and *Igbele* cult. At the close of each year, the Chief priest of *Igbele* would announce the day on which the initiation ceremony would be held. This initiation preceded the day of the cleansing ceremony which was done to free the village of all the mishaps of the year. Gods and ancestral spirits were appeased and praised as the case may be, depending on the relationship of the people with them at that time in question.

On the day of the initiation, people who wanted to be initiated gathered at the shrine of *Igbele* which was situated on an anthill at the outskirts of the village in the West of the community. The place was called *Ipuo*. Before the entrance of the shrine two walls were constructed. Masquerades were arranged in two rows facing each other; a distance of about a metre and half in between them. The people who wanted to be initiated went to the shrine of *Igbele* and were exposed to its secrets, performing all the rites as the priest prescribed. After that, they would run out and jump over the first wall. As they ran in between the rows of masquerades they were beaten until they had successfully cleared the two fences or walls. Then they would run to the

river, take their bath and come up and have a clean shave of the head. After that, there would be feasting. Various dishes were prepared and those newly initiated into the masquerade cult and old members ate. In this way people were initiated into masquerade cult.

When masquerade first came to Igbogene, the image of each of masquerade was brought along by those who were responsible for its introduction. Later indigenous carvers like *Igbile*, *Epemu* and *Akube* emerged. These men were all highly skilled in the art of carving masquerade. *Igbile* introduced a masquerade known as *Owukpolom* into the group of masquerades that then existed. *Owukpolom* was designed to serve the definite purpose of preparing the arena for the appearance of other masquerades on the day of staging masquerade. This may be the reason why *Owukpolom* became the generic name that was given to the second generation of masquerades in Igbogene. *Igbile* was said to have been shown the face of the masquerade by a mermaid, the water spirit who was patron of the masquerade. The belief in the water spirits being the source of inspiration of masquerades accounts for the ritualistic essence of the performance. Prior to the advent of Christianity the belief that spirits controlled every aspect of human living was prevalent among African people as it was even with the ancient Greeks.

Classification of Masquerade According to the Age

There were two generation of masquerades in Igbogene. The first generation of masquerades came from Kalabari. But they came through Engenni artists who introduced them as they came to perform them in Igbogene. The Kalabari masquerades that were introduced by Engenni artist were *Sekiapu*, *Opungi*, *Ozighizagha*, *Ugoholo* and *Ovurokugba*. Apart from Kalabari masquerades, there was also an Ibo masquerade known as *Ekpe*. The exposure of the Igbogene people to this new form of artistic expression challenged them to come out with their own form of performance idiom. Two kinds of masquerades were cultivated by the people of Igbogene within the short period of their exposure to the art of masquerade. The masquerades that were developed in Igbogene were *Okougba* and *Ogbu*. Collectively, the masquerades in the first generation were known as *Owuvie*.

The second generation of masquerades were collectively known as *Owukpolom*. There were six masquerades on the whole. Out of this number five masquerades came from Elebele in Ogbia Local Government Area in Bayelsa State. The affinity between Igbogene and Elebele is established in the history of the two communities beyond the artistic domain we are discussing here. In the foremost historical account on the Epie-Atissa people Sorgwe (2000) asserts that Elebele was the last place the Igbogene people settled in course of their migration from the Benin Kingdom before they finally settled where they are in the Epie Creek. To continue fraternal links through the arts, the people of Igbogene in course of their artistic growth in the performance idiom of the masquerade invited artists from Elebele who came and taught them the performance of five out of the new generation of masquerades. The masquerades were *Agelepele*, *Ofrumoweni*, *Segbese*, *Apeledin* and *Kelekele*. It is doubtful whether these masquerades originally came from Elebele. It is obvious they may have borrowed them from an Ijaw community as all the names of the masquerades are in Izon and not in Ogbia the language of the Elebele people. It is usual for people who create anything, be it scientific or artistic, to give the phenomenon a name in the language of the creator. In course of time, during that dispensation, artist from Igbogene conceived and brought into existence *Owukpolom* as an original creation. We do not know why *Owukpolom* that was created by the people of Igbogene became the generic name the second generation of masquerades were known by. We may hazard two guesses here to explain why *Owukpolom* was adopted as the generic name the second generation of masquerades were called. Firstly, it must have been borne out of local patriotism to be assertive of a people's creative endeavour for posterity to remember. Secondly, is the linguistic factor. *Owukpolom* is a name in Epie the language the Igbogene people speak. That name has a meaning everybody can relate to easily unlike the names of the other masquerades which, though the people enjoyed, did not make sense to them at the linguistic level.

It is difficult to assign dates to the two generations of masquerades. But in terms of classification, some were regarded as male masquerades while others were looked at as female masquerades. The classification into male and female masquerades depended largely on the

physical characteristics associated with each type of masquerade. Masquerades that were masculine in outlook invariably came under the category of male masquerades. Female masquerades however, were feminine in nature and graceful to look at. Even in performance the grace with which female masquerades exhibited themselves became their hallmark. In structure, some masquerades were carved as human beings while others took the form of animals or fishes.

Organization of Masquerade

There were two systems of organization. Some masquerades were owned by families, while others were owned by societies and cults. A single family may own as many as three different kinds of masquerades. With family owned masquerades, the head of the family was the head of the masquerade. Members of families selected the performer for each masquerade it had. They prepared the costumes and make-up for it. Many also contributed money for its up keep. When it was staged, the family selected from among its members the guide to the masquerade. Other members of the family who were not directly connected with the preliminary dances before public performance of the masquerade stayed back and performed the various rituals that the masquerade demanded. Apart from *Sekiapu* all the other masquerades were owned by families. *Sekiapu* was owned by a society. Members of the society were drawn from the various families. *Sekiapu* was the most respected of all the masquerades. In the society, there was a hierarchy of officers varying from the leader to the person who was responsible for preparing the least item on the costume the masquerade wore.

Some of the families that owned masquerades were the Epemu (*Ekpe*, *Opungi*); Eke and Onyunma (*Ozighigagha*); Akali (*thologho*), and Isolo (*Ogbou*).

Functions of Masquerade

Masquerades were believed to have great potency in protecting the people against several forms of soulish pollution and contamination. Masquerades worshippers were believed to be blessed by the spirit that possessed them. Masquerade worshippers attributed material benefits and other forms of satisfaction to have accrued to them from their devotion to its worship. In a

way the art had a deep spiritual implication. At the period this paper is discussing in Igbogene masquerades were worshipped since they were taken to be gods.

Also, masquerades were believed to function as the link between the world of the living and the dead. That was why, when any important person died in the community, there was a performance of masquerade in order to herald his spirit into the land of the dead. It was believed that unless that ceremony was performed the spirit of the dead person would not be accepted into the spirit world. The spirit of such a dead person would continue to be earth bound. Such a spirit the belief went on could be very mischievous.

Furthermore, masquerade featured prominently on the day of the cleansing ceremony. The cleansing ceremony preceded the celebration of the New Year. Masquerades performed many ritualistic observances that were deemed necessary in order to purify the people from, the pollution of the passing year. During this ceremony, cases between families were settled and restitutions were made where necessary.

The cleansing ceremony was done so that the whole town could be ushered into the New Year without any deity begrudging her. It was believed that if any deity had any cause to be angry with the town, the New Year would bring trouble for the citizens. Many fierce and dangerous things could happen. Famine, epidemics and the like could be expected. So in order to avert danger the people performed the various rites and sacrificed to various deities that needed to be appeased. The role of the masquerade on this occasion was indispensable.

Moreover, masquerades served to entertain the people. The entertainment value of the performing arts, of which the performance of masquerades is a part of, is a function that is always taken for granted in any discussion of role of the performing arts in society. About the entertainment value of masquerades, the sources the present writer contacted for the interviews on the subject laid emphasis on this particular function of masquerade. As people who had passed through the ritualistic and other functions of masquerade, one would have thought that they would stress the other points about the functions of masquerade than entertainment. Entertainment, all the three sources contacted in course of the research that has produced this paper, agreed was

the function of masquerade that was common to every one in the community. Youths and elders derived pleasure from it. It was appealing to everyone, so no other function could easily have an edge over it. On the days of staging masquerades, many relatives from the various villages surrounding Igbogene were reunited as people from far and near came to watch the performance. So, in that vein, masquerade served to entertain the people as well as bring them together closely.

Staging Masquerades

Masquerades were staged on two occasions. *Owuvie*, the first generation masquerade was stage once every year. While *Owukpolom* the second generation of masquerade was staged once every year and on the death of every important person in the village. *Owuvie* was staged immediately after the cleansing ceremony.

After the cleansing ceremony the Chief priest and elders consulted the oracle *Owem* to enquire whether or not masquerade should be staged. If *Owem* answered favourably then a day would be announced on which masquerade would be staged. But if *Owem* was not in support, the people did not stage masquerade, if they stubbornly decided to stage masquerade, it would be a failure and the entire village; it was believed would suffer.

If *Owem* was in support that masquerade should be staged any year, the leader of the masquerade guild would announce in consultation with his members the date which masquerade would be staged. Messages of invitation were then sent to all their surrounding neighbours. To indicate that the time of the masquerade ceremony has reached they hoisted a carved kite the symbol of the guild on a high pole.

On the day on which the masquerade was staged, the priest of the major deity, some representatives of the masquerade guild constructed an altar in the middle of the *Akpanigha* or masquerade playground. It was on this altar that every animal or cock was sacrifice. This practice was akin to the days of the ancient Greeks in which performance and religion were strictly tied to the worship of Dionysus. After they had prepared it, women came and swept the field. Later drummers came with bamboo poles and arranged it, and sat in two rows facing each other.

By this time, spectators gathered on all sides of the field. When the drums began, the youngest of the masquerade, one of the female masque-

rades came and danced around the field sweeping it a symbolic manner. Then the rest of the masquerades came in a dancing group into the *Akpanigha* or arena. Before the masquerades came out, guns were shot and canons were fired. When they were gathered in the *Akpanigha*, arena, every masquerade danced when it was its turn, until they all took their turns. The chief masquerade danced last. When it came out it was clear that the show had almost come to an end. When it completed its dances, the ceremony was declared over then each masquerade danced to the compound or segment of the community where it came from.

The Demise of Masquerade

We shall now explore factors that were responsible for the demise of the masquerade phenomenon in Igbogene. Masquerades were destroyed in 1916 in Igbogene. When Christianity came to the town in 1913, it won a phenomenal victory. It was highly successful, in that those who were exponents of the masquerade cult and the principal worshippers of the other gods were those to be first converted. Led to be convinced that masquerade was fetish so should be destroyed, they brought out the masquerades and destroyed them. One of the sources this writer interviewed for this work lamented the destruction of *Sekiapu* one of the masquerades in particular. According to him, that masquerade was very beautiful, such that when it was brought out to be destroyed people felt reluctant to lay hands on it. It was kept outside for about two weeks before it was eventually smashed.

The enthusiasm with which the totality of the people accepted Christianity above any other thing can account for the death of masquerade in Igbogene. But viewed from the point of the psychology of the conversion experience, it is always imperative that following conversion there must be a clean sweep from those things that have been characteristic of an individual's life in the past. This view is amply demonstrated in the Bible. For instance when some magicians became converted in the Acts they brought out their magic books to be burnt. It may not have been out of place for the missionaries to insist on a kind of house cleaning of the spiritual house of the converts. As it was the people themselves believed that the source of inspiration of some of the masquerade was a mermaid spirit.

Besides, the ritual element of the performance idiom was heavily tilted in favour of religion. Since masquerades were worshipped as gods there could have been no way to allow the people to continue in the practice if some kind of atavism in their faith was to be forestalled in the future. If the performance of masquerades in practice had undergone a degree of refinement in order to divest it from the crutches of religion, then conversion to the Christian faith could not have destroyed it. But the missionaries that came to Igbogene did not have the training their counterparts have today, in which understanding and relating the gospel to people within the context of their culture, is a part of the training. At that time everything cultural or indigenous in the lives of the people were seen to be demonic. That probably accounts for the adoption of English and Jewish names by converts. So it is obvious that the phenomenon of masquerade was killed in Igbogene because there was the absence of cultural education within the context of the evangelistic efforts at the time of the spiritual transformation of the people. This education the missionaries and the people they came to win did not have.

Apart from the spiritual factors that could be blamed for the demise of masquerade in Igbogene, the activity of the *Igbele* cult to which the phenomenon of masquerade was tied to in Igbogene was more responsible for its death. The cult had a pervasive influence on the people. It was used as a machinery to gag and coerce people in the society. Women and children were the primary objects of coercion. The yoke of *Igbele* was something the people wanted to get rid of but did not know how to, or were afraid to find out how. So when Christianity came and preached deliverance from oppression, for some of the people the immediate menace they wanted deliverance from was the masquerade phenomenon that was associated with the cult no matter the pleasure they had derived from it. The demise of masquerade in Igbogene is characteristic of proverbial throwing away of the baby with the bath water. This is largely due to the inability of the missionaries to discriminate between elements in a cultural practice to uphold and which to judge and ask for destruction. Whatever reaction of the people to their once cherished practice, it is obvious that their inability to understand the new faith in order to relate to the wider world of their cultural heritage was responsible for the death of masquerade in

Igbogene. For some inexplicable reasons even in this era of cultural renaissance no attempt has been made to recreate masquerades again in Igbogene.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to present in a historical perspective a performance idiom that was once in existence among the Igbogene people, which out of missionary zeal was destroyed in 1916 when the people converted to Christianity. We have presented the origin of masquerade, pointing out that the artistic medium was introduced to Igbogene by Engenni people who brought Kalabari masquerades in to the community. Besides, we also noted the fraternal links between Igbogene and Elebele which the communities used the medium of masquerade to foster. We have also discussed the classification, the functions, the organisation and staging of masquerades. We examined the basis of the action of the missionaries which eventually led to the demise of the phenomenon of masquerade in Igbogene. On the whole we have noted the cohesive force the performance idiom of masquerade had in relating one group to another. In a volatile terrain like the Niger Delta cross cultural links should be encouraged in order to diffuse tension through group participation in the arts. This is particularly needed to curb youth restiveness. In this way their energies could better be directed to useful ends. We have noted in our study of the demise of masquerade in Igbogene that the religious aspects of an art should be extricated from it so that should anything happen to the faith of the performers it will not affect the art. That

intricate balance was absent in the case of maskers who converted to Christianity in Igbogene. We have also noted that forces of coercion whether they be political or artistic have a way of been resisted and rejected. Since the people rejected masquerades because it became a tool in the hands of the *Igbele* cult, it is obvious that for art to remain relevant in its mission within a culture it must not allow itself to be perverted and used for bad ends.

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