

# CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF *Mmanwu* (MASQUARADE) IN IGBO WORLD VIEW (WELTANCHUNNG)

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## **Abstract**

The Igbo concept of *Mmanwu* has masquerade as its English lexical equivalent in meaning. As part of the tradition and culture of Igbo people, *Mmanwu* is very central to every facet of the Igbo cosmology. Using the method of philosophical analysis, the researcher finds out that the concept of *Mmanwu* as something positively created, instituted and empowered beyond man as spirit to act on behalf of the people for the people within the human society but has been bastardized in our contemporary society by the uninformed youth and in the name of civilization and often in the name of religion.

**Keywords:** *Mmanwu*, Igbo, World view

## **Introduction**

*Mmanwu* can be seen as people who are dead but still finds a way of communicating and interacting with the living. The Igbo masquerades are traditional performances acted out by exclusive secret societies within a community. These exclusive societies must be initiated into the society. The identities of the initiated *Mmanwu* members are not disclosed to non-members. The members, also known as masqueraders wear mask to hide their identities from the rest of the people and must not be unmasked until they retire to secluded places. Masquerades are considered sacred and holy. As such, they are respected. In most cases, women are not allowed to enjoy close proximity with them because, the Igbo people perceive masquerades as visitors from the spirit world who are specifically sent to carry

out a mission on earth or in the land. Masquerades in the Igbo culture have a deep spiritual meaning that had been passed from generation to another.

*Mmanwu* is a name for traditional Igbo masquerade. It is meant to embody both the spirit and the human world where they co-exist. Despite the ever-present western influences, *Mmanwu* remain true and effective. The costumes for masquerades are usually made out of straw, rough fabrics and woods. In time past, Igbos regard *Mmanwu* as a means of maintaining peace and order, judging cases and reprimanding evil doer in the communities. They played the roles of law enforcement agents and no one was thought to be more powerful than they were and whenever they appear, they appeared not in human shape and attitude but rather exhibited a supernatural and divine power empowered either by the gods, ancestors or spirits. The masquerades in this regard as regarded as spokesmen of the gods and as such, cannot be seen by mere mortals. While entertaining through dances and exhibiting extra-human feat, most *Mmanwu* would walk up to certain individuals and loudly expose their bad habits, crimes and behaviours. Through this means, people always took correction when wrong because of their perception of the *Mmanwu* as semi-human, semi-god. The masquerades were also effective in keeping up with traditional norms and values in the communities.

Very dishearteningly, with the creeping in of western civilization and religion, the relevance of masquerades shifted from an embodiment of the union between the spiritual and human world. *Mmanwu* which was positively created, instituted and empowered beyond man as a spirit to act on behalf of the people for the people within the human society but has been bastardized in our contemporary society by uninformed youth. They go about extorting money from the

people and vandalizing public property. Contemporary masquerades wear all manner of clothing being seen everywhere and constituting all manners of nuisance. Hence, the onus of this paper is a critical examination of *Mmanwu* and its relevance in contemporary Igbo society.

### **Understanding the Concept of *Mmanwu***

*Mmanwu* has the same etymological root with *mmanwu*(man) in *mma*(beauty). Like the concept of *mmanwu* which is *mma di*, beauty there is, *Mmanwu* as a compound word comprises of *mma* and *nwu* literally meaning beauty and death. Conceptually, *Mmanwu* is a beauty that is dead. Hence, Onyeneke descriptively had the theme of his book as: *The Dead among the Living: Masquerades in the Igbo Society*. *Mmanwu* represents one of the greatest conspiracies of truth of fact unanimously believed to be something and respected as such until one is initiated into such cultic institution. Cult here should be understood as positively secret establishment that has the interest of the community at heart. Onyeneke's descriptive title for *Mmanwu* may contrast very strongly with our understanding of ancestors as the Living Dead. Nevertheless, both concept portrays *Mmanwu* as something alive but conspicuously accepted to be dead and treated and feared as such.

Traditionally, *Mmanwu* therefore, can be understood as one of the dead ones and relatives who usually come out to interfere positively in the affairs of the human society. To this extent, the root or rightly put, the ant hole is the place where the dead ones come out from and retire at the end of the festivity. Hence, the community owns their own *Mmanwu*. *Mmanwu* does not own any human community. Hence, the mature initiates of the community empower and determines their

*Mmanwu* in line with the reason for allowing the *Mmanwu* to come out from a particular ant hole. However, it is presumed that every ant-hole leads to the grave and land of the dead from where the *Mmanwu* rests and rises. From another source, *mmadu*, as in *mma* and *ndu*, is regarded as the beauty of life. Shakespeare in this line of thought interprets man as the paragon of beauty and in line with this thought, *Mmanwu* can be seen as the beauty of death.

### **Igbo worldview of *Mmanwu***

According to Chinwe (2011), “A worldview has been referred to as how people perceive and explain their world, or the ways things are or change in their environment” (p. 306). In the same vein, Animalu (1990) sees it as a people’s way of organizing their activities which explain the how and why of daily existence. The Igbo people have basically a religious and cultural perception about life, existence, and their actions. A cultural group such as the Igbo is able from their worldview, to explain reality, life and the human environment, and predict space-time events, and finally exert control over their environment. In this way, the force of Igbo Religion and culture as of any other religion, culture or ideological system rests with the cosmology, which undergirds it. In the case of the traditional Igbo, all forms of individual and group religious practices occur within the broad outline of their worldview (Ejizu, 1987). The Igbo people have their perception about not just the universe but things existent in it. Chinwe (2011) reiterates that the Igbo people see their world as made up to two planes: the physical and the spiritual. Igbo worldview, however, abhors the tendency to a digital categorization of things. They believe that there is a dual-traffic and interaction between the inhabitants of the two worlds (Metuh, 1981; Manus, 1993; & Isizoh, 1999).

In this way, the understanding among the Igbo is that spiritual beings and cosmic forces are highly intermingled. The activities of spiritual beings and forces often directly impinge on the affairs of humans in the human world. This fundamental religious outlook on life continues to adjust itself each time, to the changing circumstances of the life experiences of the people. In Igbo religious worldview, the human world is three-dimensional –the sky (*eluigwe*); a place where Chukwu, the supreme being often perceived by the Igbo people to possess the highest power and authority and habouring the sun god (*anyanwu*), the moon god (*owa*), the star god (*nkpakpandu*), *Amadioha* (the god of thunder); the earth, inhabited by human beings intricately woven with water; and the spirit/ancestral world. Each of the three dimensions operates as a viable reality or a place of habitation; with all three interconnected or contiguous and continuous in a non-hierarchical manner. This means that in such a worldview, although the Supreme Being is believed to live in the sky and major divinities such as Lightning, Thunder, Sun, and Moon are near Him, there is nothing to suggest that the ancestors who live in the ancestral world are inferior (Kalu & Kalu, 1993)

According to Chinwe (2011):

One important characteristic of this spatial ordering of reality in Igbo worldview is the due recognition extended to the exalted position and power of the preternatural order and supersensible beings over humans and the material order. Yet, humans and their world are located at the center of the traditional Igbo cosmic structure. This is because human life, for the Igbo,

although received from God, is the greatest good to be fostered. In this way, Igbo traditional world-view is seen as heavily anthropocentric. In it, the activities of the various categories of spirits as well as the happenings in the other realms of the universe are seen as meaningful insofar as they relate to human life and the general welfare of humans in the environment. (p. 307)

Consequently, the *Mmanwu* in Igbo world view is a transfiguration from the mortal who wears the mask to the spiritual realm such that at that particular time, such a person does not act according to his own will and dictates but is being influenced by a higher being. Similarly, Nwankwo (2015) posits that “Among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria, masquerades (*Mmanwu*) were conceived as ancestral spirits whose interest in the affairs of their living descendants compel them to visit the community during festivals, funerals and when things are not normal in the community” (p.2).

The living-dead are what these masquerade/spirits embody. Igbo people believe that the dead never actually die; rather, they remain in a "personal immortal state". They reside somewhere between the earthly world and the spiritual world. These living-dead are believed to be closely related to those of the village. Since men are masqueraders, they are buried within their homes so their spirits may be close to their families (Chiene, 1980). The living-dead then return to the earthly world from time to time to offer spiritual advice. It is the living-dead, who the masquerade portrays. These masquerades are believed to be a re-incarnation of the spirit of

the dead. In other words, the spirit of the dead is invoked into a masquerade.

### **Contrasting the Concept of *Mmanwu* as the Dead among the Living**

*Mmanwu* is a societal traditional cult meant for the initiates. Non-initiates into *Mmanwu* cult are known with the term *Ogbodi*. The initiates are the humans who will be privileged to come close to the *Mmanwu*, help him come out from the purported ant-hole and probably assist him on the human level if needed. All these performing arts were to create aura and mystify as much as possible and as well keep intact the protective and dispensing powers of redressing serious and disturbing issues in traditional Igbo society. And only the dead among the Dead rightly put will be greatly impeccable among the humans for the humans.

Onyeneke (1987) rightly calls *Mmanwu* the dead among the living as the conceptual understanding of masquerade in Igbo society. They are presumed dead and held so. They are the living spirits that one partially see, often hear and interact with but has the last say whose power, instruction and verdict as well as pieces of crucial information or revelations cannot be doubted or questioned but held sacrosanct. *Mmanwu*, from this unique understanding as the dead among living dwell with the humans and interact with them. Though, not actually dead, *Mmanwu* is presumed dead and treated so. The Igbos believes that only spirits and correlates like souls and concepts of life-beyond this earthly life supersedes all. Such spirits cannot relate humanly with humans. Hence, a creature-like has to be created and that is *Mmanwu* and not Muo. However, when people abbreviate and refer to *Mmanwu* as muo, they are

referring to *Mmanwu* as something not human and most probably a spirit that relates with human.

The concept of spirit as *muo* may not adequately convey the meaning, place and role of *Mmanwu* in Igbo society. Spirits are taken to be really inhuman as such and they are because they are according to catechism of Catholic Church thus: ife di adi din du. Na enwerearu, naanaraoafuanya ma o bu nu onuya ma o bumetuyaka. In this understanding, one appreciates the fact that spirits exist but has no visible, communicative and interactive relationship with us. This form of relational activities of spirit are beyond life.

### **Types of *Mmanwu***

**Visible *Mmanwu*:** these are masquerades meant for the public and are often more entertaining or used for entertainment purposes. Masks used to offer a visual appeal for these masquerades. People having been initiated by merely wear bright and colourful costumes accompanied by spectacular dance steps and display and sometimes, harassment in a bid to scare the spectators. This types of *Mmanwu* can be seen by both men and women, young and old, initiated and non-initiated because it is majorly for entertainment purposes.

**Invisible *Mmanwu*:** these set of masquerade perform mostly at night and are for special purposes. Their main instrument is sound and not the visuals. There are three groups of invisible masquerades; Agummuo, AchikwoOjiinaOcha, and Ogbagu. Agummuo represent the Leopard (tiger) spirit masquerades. In this group, transverse through the village at night and produce horrible screaming sounds to create fear in the heart of those not initiated into the masquerade society. The achikwuocha (white) masquerade act as village surveillance and the achikwu



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(black) are performed not only to entertain the people and protect them but also when they will be punishment or for the execution of a criminal in the community. The ogbuagu are strictly used for entertainment. This group are known to make loud cacophonous noises with various musical instruments and dances in the twilight.

In the past, Igbo regard masquerades (*Mmanwu*) as a means of maintaining peace and order, judging cases and reprimanding evil doers in the communities. They played the role of law enforcement agents and no one was thought to be more powerful than they were and whenever they appeared, they appear not in human form and attitude but rather, exhibit a supernatural and divine power empowered either by the gods, ancestors or spirit. The masquerades in this position are regarded as spokesmen of the gods and as such cannot be seen by a mere mortal. While, entertaining through dances and exhibiting extra-human feats, most masquerades (*Mmanwu*) would walk to certain individuals and loudly expose their bad habits, crimes and misbehaviours. As people would always take corrections from the reprimands of these *Mmanwus*, the masquerade were effective in keeping up with traditional norms and values in the communities.

### **Functions of *Mmanwu***

The functions of masquerade in Igboland are enormous. Usually, traditional masquerades have spiritual or religious and social functions. There are several classes of such masquerades, ranging from those for mere entertainment, to the more powerful and sacred ones "which formerly, executed witches and workers of bad magic." Such functions of the masquerade include the underlisted.

## **Social Control like Punishing Criminals and other Evil Practices**

The masquerade is a visible embodiment of the community will assist in implementing its social order. The authority of masquerades affects the community as a whole with no respect of male or female, the initiated or non-initiated. It is the custom and it is applied equally to everyone under it. Masquerades often perform a social function and are an important part of life in several African societies. Egungun masquerades (from a religious cult) found among the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria were responsible for maintaining social order and administering justice. Ottenberg (1975) observed, that:

Players are allowed using artificial secrecy provided by masks to reveal secrets about persons in the village. The essence of the play is the direct ridicule and satirizing of real persons, and topical events, clothed in ritualized and superficially religious terms (p.129)

Masquerades are used to prohibit and impose sanctions on certain actions and expressions that are immoral, untrue and offensive to individuals and the town in general.

## **Rites of Passage like Initiations, Weddings or Funerals Ceremonies**

There are also emotional and psychological benefits derived from masquerade-performing rituals. The masquerade may be considered as a means of providing communal therapy and acknowledging the "shadow" and "child" archetypes, through rituals and rites of passage. Jung (1964) expressed this relationship as follows: Religious observances, i.e. the

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retelling and ritual repetition of the mythical event, consequently serve the purpose of bringing the image of the child, and everything connected with it, again and again before the eyes of the conscious mind so that the link with the original condition may not be broken. Rites of passage and initiation rituals are some of the means employed in marking stages in the life of members of a community. There are three stations -birth, puberty, and death. Marriage sometimes coincides with puberty and even though it is important, some people do not get married while others do so more than once. Considering the profound psychological effect each stage has on a person it is important that adequate preparation is made to guide him/her through with minimal risk, pain or loss.

Sacred Rituals -Fertility Rites, Warding off Evil Spirits  
Archetypes are manifested in the form of images that are found in myths and rituals around the world. There are an infinite number of archetypal images; however, some occur with greater frequency than others do. For example, the "Great Mother" archetype, which "is often associated with things and places standing for fertility and fruitfulness", is acknowledged among the Yoruba with the Gelede masks that honor ancestral mothers. Another common archetype, the shadow, represents the dark side of human nature and is sometimes referred to as an evil or malevolent spirit. Several types of masquerades fall into this category. They assist the community in warding off bad and unaccepted spirits that may distort the peaceful running of the community.

### **Bastardization of *Mmanwu* in Contemporary Igbo Society**

In Igbo society, masquerading is a festival display that is connected with the supernatural world of ancestors and spirits.

On the concept of Igbo masking, Ukaegbu (2007) asserts that the masking institution is perhaps the only platform in the cultural Igbo society for reinforcing and enacting the interactive relationship that it has with the numerous forces of its universe. According to Ukaegbu (2007), “the primordial encounters’ arising from this relationship provides the major focus and themes of Igbo masking” (p. 30). In line with this assertion, Ukaegbu (2007) opines that Igbo masking sustains interactions between the seen and unseen. Concerning the interaction between the seen (humans) and the unseen (spirits), Nzekwu (1981) as cited in Nwaru (2005) adds that in Igbo-land whenever masqueraders appear in performance, ancestral spirits visit mankind. The nature and contents of Igbo masking are common knowledge in every community; the stories are well-known, but the interesting thing as Ukaegbu (2007) notes is that “the audience are sustained with the aesthetic depth and dynamism that performers bring to their re-enactments of primordial encounters and familiar action lines than in elaborate narratives” (p. 31). The masquerades paraded during the masquerade festivals in the different cultural zones of the Igbo region represent a wide variety of animals, suggestive gods, spirits, demons and ancestors, and the wearers play roles that are appropriate to what or who they represent. They did not only act links and connections between humans and spirits but also served as entertainers in the communities where they are found. The traditional Igbo communities always found a means of keeping themselves happy after the tedious planting season and the masquerade display was one of them.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

*Mmanwu* can be seen as people who are dead but still finds a way of communicating and interacting with the living. Despite the ever-present western influences, civilization and globalization, *Mmanwu* remain true and effective. It has serve

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as a veritable tool for preserving the culture of the people, entertaining people and communicating with the dead spirits who are believed in Igbo cosmology to never forsake the living. They visit from time to time to either advice, admonish or reprimand and as dead beings, they cannot manifest in their original form hence, the indispensability of *Mmanwu*. But, in recent time, the original notion of *Mmanwu* has been bastardized and the purpose of establishing *Mmanwu* society defeated. Young people have totally abandoned the traditional roles *Mmanwu* played in communities and have transformed it into a trade and means of extorting from people. With the help of alcohol and other hard drugs, they forcefully extort money from people and even wreck all manner of havocs in the name of being *Mmanwu*. To this, the researcher therefore, recommends that there should be a visitation of what *Mmanwu* is in contemporary time with what it ought to be. To ensure that the purpose of establishing *mmanwu* in Igbo land is not defeated, *Mmanwu* must be given prominence and anyone for bastardizes the *Mmanwu* practice must be sanctioned.

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