

THE FACT, MYTH AND FALSEHOOD OF EKU DEITY: A DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Pre-colonial traditional Africa society evolves a masquerade for social interaction, oath-taking, as well as linking the living with the ancestral spirit- an oracle for consultation, and execution of justice. For the people of Ebiratao of north-central Nigeria, masquerade costume is in two parts: facekuerade (non – mask masquerade) and the mask masquerade. The two served as an agent of social order, a fortified phenomenon against the evil of witches through incantation, also enacted for entertainment and disciplinary figure meant to reform wayward children. Generally speaking, the institution of masquerade, leadership by elders, custodians of the people's traditional culture served as a pivot in guiding the traditional set-up of the Ebira people. The status and roles of masquerade as arbiter was truncated by the British colonialist but the custodians of Eku (masquerade) hold tenacious to Eku practices as a culture of the people long after the departure of the British and the antagonism from the Orthodox Islamic revivalist (Sheick Ahmad Rufai of the Tijaniyyah brotherhood sect) and the Young Muslim scholars did not perish the outing of masquerade. This study therefore; aims to discuss the origin, myth and false belief in the origin of the masquerade and its function as an agent of ancestors to discipline offenders in the pre-colonial Ebira society.

Keynotes:-Facekuerade, (non - mask masquerade), Mask Masquerade, Incarnation, Ancestral Messenger

Introduction

Before the advent of Islamic and Christian faiths or rather the incursion of the imperial colonialist, Africa society used masquerades largely as a symbol of culture and customs. In Nigeria, the Igbo of Southeast modernised it for tourist attraction and entertainment, it sometimes came out in animal forms signifying peace or in frightened nature. It also symbolised an act of social control where different cultural segments are held together. Masquerades are associated with a spiritual element, to the Igbo; it represents a deity or spirit of a dead man. Its identity is kept secret and is mostly performed by men.¹ To the Esan, the *Erinni* (Masquerades) are organic to their myth of creation and act as major stabilisers of the people's destiny. As far as the people are concerned, they are ancestral

spirits who periodically visit their living in forms of masquerade. Their visits are regarded as spiritual interventions to the world of the living and as a result, are highly venerated. They are a symbolic resurrection of the ancestors.² To the *Ifeku-Ibaji, Egwu* (masquerade) symbolised both the ancestral shrine as well as a figure of the resurrected spirit of a dead elder, whose appearance and performance played a protective and regulatory role in the affairs of the living. In the *Ejaghain* society of Cross - River, the task of detecting witches and wizards rested with the *Echi-Obasi-njom* (the masquerade).³ In the entire Yoruba land *Egungun* represent the spirit of the ancestors who have descended from heaven/mountain. It celebrates a period when the dead interact with the living, as it is their responsibility to compel the living to uphold the ethical standards of past generations.⁴ Finally, the Ebira tao sees the *Eku* as an ancestral spirit designed to strengthen the power of men against women folks and to uphold social order in the entire Ebira domain.

Brief History of Ebira Tao People

Ohiare has observed that the history of the Ebira, from the context of the various struggles which are preserved in their tradition can be divided into four periods.⁵ The first period started in the Gongola basin and ended with their migration to the Lower Benue valley. According to the tradition, the Ebira in this period were found in Wukari (in the present - day Taraba State) and formed part and parcel of the Apa group who founded the Kwararafa confederacy consisting of Pindiga Kona and Kwararafa. This was the time they were located in (E)bira a name they came to be known and identified by this period, nothing of proper historical, social and political materials could be reconstructed, some have even called it a pre-history of the Ebira. A date between 12th and 14th centuries has been suggested.⁶

The second period was the Lower-Benue Valley when the Ebira took their name by describing themselves as people from E(bira) i.e., Anebira. The exact place of settlement here is still obscure. But some guesses had been made from the tradition collected among Idoma which claim that the Ebira had been living in the area of Ahinse down to the area of the modern Agatu district where Idoma ancestors met them.⁷ A date between 15th and 16th centuries has been suggested for the earliest Idoma migration into the area. This means that the Ebira might be present in the lower Benue close to the 14th century.⁸

Ohiare saw the migration of the Ebira across the right bank of the Niger around the present location of Ajaokuta often known as Ebira-Opete (i.e., old Ebira) as marking the third period in the Ebira historical developments. The time of this migration is said to be during the reign of the second Atta of Igala.⁹ Ohiare, relying on “tie reference” and “cross-references” chronological systems, has suggested 15th and 16th centuries.¹⁰ Here, settlements like Ukpake, Ohuruku, Egodo, Ochiobayin and Obangede were founded.¹¹ The fourth stage according to the division of Ohiare was when the Ebira were forced on a

gradual movement to inland and north-west, from Ebira-Opete in families, lineage and even clans to their present location probably at about the late 17th Century.¹²

A. R. Mohammed suggested that since it was a series of migration, the movements might have spanned the late 17th century A. D.¹³ and mid-18th century suggested by Y. A. Ibrahim.¹⁴ While some families, groups, lineages and even hunting parties moved to the Ebira Okene area, others moved in the same period to form the Ebira Etuno within the Akoko-Edo ethnic clusters. However, the mainstream of Ebira Etuno was said to have been formed by those who migrated from the Okene area in the second wave to the hilly Akoko-Edo neighbourhood. This latter group consisted of Ehimozoko, Akuta, Avaka, Ogu, Agada and Idelle clans.¹⁵

The Origin of Eku Cult

The genesis or origin of the *Eku* cult continued to be a subject of controversy among researchers in Ebira history. It was argued that the *Eku* institution was with the Ebira before the migration to their present location and an example of its antiquity could be seen in its widespread practices among those communities like Nupe, Chamber, Igala, and Idoma. This may point to a common source; Erim has shown in his book that Ebira had practised *Eku*, especially *Ekwu-Oba* when in the Idoma area probably around the 16th century.¹⁷

Belief in the *Eku* phenomenon is held by many peoples, particularly those who have a linguistic affinity with one another in the old kwararafa kingdom. The Jukun, the Alago, the Ebira and many others believe in *Eku* and have various names for them. They practice it in different fashions.¹⁸ We may ask this question, what is *Eku*? *Eku* as a form of primitive culture has a value which has been unanimously accepted by the Ebira people. It is a cultural heritage connected with the spiritual and moral development of the people and has become a way of life generally, at least in the recent past.¹⁹

The *Eku* phenomenon has so many interpretations by so many people in various communities. The people of Koton-karfe, Umaish, Toto, Abaji, Mozum have various interpretations of it.²⁰ The people of Okene, Okehi and Ebira-Igara conceptualized it to be some kind of spirit. To others it is an idol or even a shrine or an oracle containing the idol while others accord it with the same divinity accorded to God. It is also thought to be an "ori" in the Ebira tao dialect. To some communities *Eku* is a demi-god or a dead relative living in Heaven.²¹ Ebira regarded *Eku* as masquerade or *Facekurade* (unmasked masquerade) or a derivation from the Yoruba dialect Ojuju, meaning charm.²² *Eku* could also be used for protection on the farm against stealing farm products or in a mystical form planted on the wife to forestall adultery; here it is referred to as *Atu'reku*.²³ The belief in *Eku* was traditionally adheres to because it provide Ebira with a means of sustaining life, natural power and belief that can liberate them from uncertainties that characterise their life, and this includes natural disasters, epidemics, fear of the unknown, and many of such beliefs are strong.

A masquerade can be completely covered by a costume. These may assume tall shapes like the *ndakogboya* or *gunnu* of the Nupe, they may display features of non-human beings – such as crocodiles, bush-cows, snakes etc in their dress. Most masquerades in these categories also wear 'leggings' or rattles of metal objects.²⁴ In the formation of the Eku-cult among the Ebira Tao Y. A. Ibrahim explicitly describes it in these few words:

“... *Ododo of Okehi and Obaje of Eika...were brothers and one day quarrelled over age seniority. The other elders established that Obaji was the senior of the two. One day Obaji fell seriously ill and an Onoku (a woman in who was confided the secret of the masquerade cult) went to inform Ododo. Thereupon, Ododo arranged for his own death immediately and instructed his son to embody his spirit in a masquerade that very day so that he could take precedence over Obaji in the hereafter and in masquerade matters...*”²⁵

In the evolution of *Eku*, it can be used to swear by, or invoke spirits or jinns against a person. *Eku* is applied as a kind of charm to harm people, prevent witchcraft, or used to protect oneself from spirits and evils of all kinds. It is even practised as a religion or cult as some believe it has magical powers, and, therefore uses the phenomenon for various savage tricks.²⁶ In fact; *Eku* has been given various descriptions and superstitious beliefs. For instance, *Eku* is, accepted as a way of life, the value of which has been regarded with deep affection, by generation after generation. The *Eku* can be the soul of a dead person believed to be active in heaven, known as *Indaneku* in Ebiraland and *Igarra*.²⁷ Masquerades still reflect the elements of continuity in our traditional cultures. As conspicuous participants in the festivals of the Arts and other government 'occasion' in which they are caused to function out of context, they demonstrate their enduring Artistic merit. Their increasing use by playwrights in modern dramatic performances is a mark of their adaptability.²⁸

Myth and Falsehood in the Formation of Eku Cult

There is this belief in reincarnation among the Ebira in their local parlance, *AneEkuanave* which is the person who was the dead person that came back. Sometimes, it is said to be *Ozavouhi ve* that is, a person who reincarnated. Ebira also believes in the efficacy of *Ekua* *eku o gwumi* meaning *Ekusave* me. One of the falsehoods in the *Eku* could be clearly obvious in the *Eku'echi* festival that deprived the women folks of coming out in the night. The women were made to believe that the dancing and singing crowds are those of spirits. But, in rear sense they are not; but men who wear their normal dresses and are singing or dancing together with masquerades. The night masquerade is unmasked and can only be seen by a spiritual woman called *Onoku* whose birth witnessed some mysterious occurrence.²⁹

Some babies are named after dead relations, in order to retain the name in the family. These

are generally practiced by the Muslim and Christian faiths. But an Ebira tradition of *eva*, divination to know who the new birth baby reincarnates was determined by the oracle. For instance, a girl can reincarnate in the form of her grandfather the entire households would call her *Adami Obanyi* despite her feministic nature. In some cases: two names are given, one being the Islamic or Christian name, and the other either the title or greeting of the dead relation. This method of naming exists in Okene, Okehi, Igarra, Koton-karfi, Umaisha, Toto, Abaji, Mozun and other areas where the Ebira communities are found. In Igarra, as in Okene and Okehi areas, the naming of children to indicate the belief in incarnation is not any mark difference. In Igarra, a sick person who has died will reincarnate and the new baby who thus emerges will receive the same name as that of the dead person. It could be the name of a late father, uncle or any distant or near relative. However, some household naturally named children after their dead families for the simple act of love or just to remind them of their late loved ones.³⁰ This phenomenon is sometimes monopolized to costume the new born baby as *Ekú* in the representation of the dead elder.

The dead great -grandfather of a person is called *Ohiku* even after his death but the grandfather is called *adamiOgbain*. The soul of the *Ohiku* was naturally referred to ancestors that later transform into *Ekú* which further signifies the annual celebrations of *Ekú-ahire*, *Ekú'echi* and many other festivals celebrated to mark his decent *echi* or his ascent *ahire*. The word *Idaneku*, meaning heaven, appears to have a link to *Ekú*, where the spirit of the dead lived. Before the festival begins the performers of the masquerade will go to *Iregba* where the *Ori* was venerated and praised with offerings of native cola-nut for protection and guidance. This particular deed is common during the night masquerade; from *Ori* designation the masquerade proceeds to *Uta*, where a platform was mounted for further entertainment.³¹ According to Sheick Ahmad Rufai, the Late Sir Ahmad Bello Sardauna, the northern premier leader was bemused when on his visit to Ebiraland and was told that the performing masquerade was a dead person. He thereafter, categorically stated in his responses that he has never found conspicuous liars in a cultural heritage as displayed before him.³²

The *Ekú'oba* described as the “chief eku” comes in the daytime like *Ekuechichi*, the *Akatapa* are called *EkúOdu* (daytime eku), *EkúOba* is masked and attired in costly clothing called *ubaneto* which is sewn in a tube-like form like the ones in Anowe and Ijumu of kabba. He wears the costume from head to toe, such that his hands and arms are concealed.³³ The arms are held tight beside his body, making no movements such that the *Ekú* himself appears to be helpless. So he and his supporters don't bear whips like other *Ekú*. It is said to be a post-burial embodiment of the spirit of the deceased personage whose sons and daughters can afford the cost of the ceremony.³⁴ He performs as the last masquerade before the *Ekú'echi* masquerade comes out. Before appearing in public he performs traditional rituals, and will not appear until chosen by divination to perform

certain rites on behalf of the clan group or village during *Ekumahire* period which leads to *Ekuechi* festival. As the *Ekuba* represents an important personage, all his/her sons and daughters wait and settle disputes. He, the *Ekuba*, and his followers do not sing. He talks through an instrument and in a strange voice, during which he forecast the future as he goes from place to place, meeting elderly people.³⁵ Very few strong men accompany him and he is seen by women. One strange physical feature of the *Ekuba* masquerade is that he reduces as well as increases his height at will. Some people say that *Ekuba* increases his height through some instruments or objects which he can project upwards but whether or not this assertion is true, nobody can tell. An *Ekuechichi* masquerade appears as a sweeper-*Ekuba* for *Ekuba* clearing up his path of all obstacles on his way including people who must be kept at a distance.³⁶

In the *Echeane* festival, the *Ekus* that features in day-light, generally, are sometimes called *Ekudu* which women can see or follow during the celebration. The *Ekus* masquerade wears a costume from head to feet, with the feet, arms and hands wrapped up, wear trousers, and on the face is a mask, but some simply have holes in the mask cloth through which they can see.³⁷ The masquerade bears whips or long sticks used in beating up people, even including sometimes misbehaving with women. Elderly people such as landlords and title-holders are not beaten up; as the *Ekugo* about from place to place he received tokens from admirers. Before the *Ekuechichi* came out, the masquerade needs to showcase his preparedness at *Iregba* where he displays spiritual prowess. The festival usually takes up to ten days and finally rounds up at a designated place called *Orere* where each *Ekus* display final entertainment. The *Ekuechichi* does not sing but the followers do sing while the *Ekus* dance for the admirer of the public. Funny enough after the whole scenario the *Ekus* went back to his family instead of the *Iregba*.³⁸ The next year the *Echeane* will be staged to initiate a new yams festival or for fertility. Most of the masquerade bears animal names, for example in the Okene area we have *Irezi*, dog, *Evu*, goat, *Uva*, alligator, *Upa*, skin or *Akoko*, pepper of Ihima and so on. During the *Ekuechi* festival, *Ekuechichi* does perform to entertain the audience but this time around without the usual costume. The *Akatapa* warned the women folks to desist from evils and the co-wife's need to live as one family.³⁹

Islamic and Christian religious convert sees the masquerade as a manifestation of the devil, and a fraud to deceive the ignorant community. These religions do not merely dissociate themselves from this African institution: they preach against the practitioners. Violent clashes between the Muslim and masquerade parties are not rare. Often too, both on religious grounds and fear for public disorder, the policy makers enact laws and byelaws restricting or proscribing masquerade festivals and functions are not unknown.⁴⁰ One observer sees masquerade as a liar from the pit of hell-fire where women are meant to believe that their dead families reincarnate to eat *apapaEkuor Ebankoko* whereas it was the living that usually eat this food.⁴¹

The Masquerade and the Muslim Ummah

As a result of the obvious deception embedded in the formation and outing of the masquerade, some zealous Muslim youths wage a vicious attack against the *Ekú* cult. Their mission failed woefully as the practitioner reacted to preserve the *Ekú* heritage. In the Okene area particularly, the Muslim Ummah constantly fought the masquerades, for instance, the Muslim brothers fought with *Evu* Masquerade from the Inike community on the 3rd March, 1991, *Ondu* Masquerade of Idozumi and *Anchi* Masquerade of Ozuwaya respectively.⁴² In most of the encounters the Muslim brothers gained upper hand and repelled the Masquerades. However, the victory did not last long when in 1993 a Masquerade named *Asiri* confronted the Muslim brothers at Bata shop which led to the death of Salawudeen Ayubi Ahmed and Abdullahi Zubair Anavami at the frontage of Obansa house adjacent to the old Okene prison.⁴³

However, the police played their part to prevent violence when they warned against any group intending to showcase Masquerade on the 18th of April, 1994. According to Jaffaru Otaru,⁴⁴ (the Chairman of the lion heart club) the custodian of *Ubazi* Masquerade defiled the order and decided to consult the seer before embarking on the Masquerade display schedule for 11th May, 1994. The diviner (father of Hassan Ochebira) recommended the sacrifices of a cock and other spiritual cleanliness to ward off any intending evil as he forecast that the outing of the Masquerade will attract wide popularity. Going by this prediction those assigned the responsibilities to enter the Masquerade costume like Abdullahi Spy was nowhere to be found, Hassan Orlando and Jaffaru Otaru systematically stepped aside from entering the costume of *Ubazi* Masquerade.⁴⁵

Unfortunately, an outsider who was not a member of the *Ekú* club called Musa tailor volunteered to enter the Masquerade costume around 12:00-1:00 pm. The majority of the *Ubazi* followers engaged in serious disagreement on the premise that it was an aberration of their stated law not to allow an outsider to enter their Masquerade. It was eventually settled when Aminu Opadi the son of Ozi Oporo intervened to allow Musa tailor to enter the costume of the Masquerade.⁴⁶ One Aminu Ozi Momoh and Jaffaru Otaru escorted the Masquerade from Idagidibo primary school and came out at Iduka. Immediately the Masquerade came out one of the Muslim brothers, Ibrahim Sani shot a gun into the air to draw the attention of the Muslim from Idozumi, Idoji, and Iduka. They responded immediately to chase the followers of *Ubazi* away. The only two strong members Aminu Momoh and Jaffaru Otaru sustained bullets wound and could not do much to help the Masquerade, they advised the *Ekú* to go through Ahademi and possibly ran down to Badoko while the two followers scammed for their safety.⁴⁷ The Masquerade was not lucky as he tripped and fell at the Ori dagidibo tree where the Muslim brothers met him. He quickly removed the head costume begging for his life.⁴⁸ The *Ekú* pleading fell on the deaf ears of the Muslim brothers as they were determined on revenging the deaths of their members in 1993 when they confronted *Asiri* Masquerade at the Bata shop. One of the

Muslim brothers chopped off the head of the Masquerade on that ill-fated day 11th May, 1994 and the news went around the town that the dead Masquerade was disturbing school pupils on their way to school and the community people also claimed to have heard voices of the Masquerade calling for revenge.⁴⁹

Following this development, three Muslim brothers were mercilessly killed on the 15th of June, 1994 at Ozuwaya including Brother Ismail Lagos in retaliation for the killing of the Masquerade.⁵⁰ An attempt to avenge the killing of Muslim brothers led to another round of bloodshed as the supporters of Masquerades mobilized to chase out the Muslim brothers from their homes. As the Masquerade performance gained an advantage, the houses and properties belonging to the Muslim youths were burnt down.⁵¹ The menace of masquerade today tainted the image of Ebira at home and Diaspora, hence, many are of the opinion that there is a need for modification. Perhaps, the masquerade can be modified for tourism like that of Argungu festival in Kebbi State.

The Function of the Masquerade

One prominent function of the masquerade derives from the concept that it is the “personification” of a natural spirit, a patron deity or an ancestor. In this context, the masquerade is a father figure and a patron before whom complaints are laid, to whom thank-offerings and soliciting presents are offered, from whom chastisement maybe expected by erring offspring and through whom messages can be sent to the departed soul. As beings that see both 'heaven and earth', the masquerade may be sought for its prophetic prediction or forth-telling of the coming agricultural year.⁵² Since it comes from the active world of the dead, the masquerade plays significant roles in the mortuary and funerary rites which usually culminate in its coming to fetch and escort the deceased on its perilous journey to the world of the ancestors. In Ebira tao tradition, they have *Ogugu* for the demise of the male and *Onyimiruweyi* for the female departed soul. The masquerade usually escorted the funeral processes of the male but not the same with female.⁵³

The verdict of masquerades in inter-settlement or inter-state disputes was sought by some Nigerian communities in the pre-colonial past. Of great interest also is the function of the masquerade in public entertainment. The drumming, the songs and chats, the dance steps and the costumes are specially reserved for those festival occasions when the masquerade performs. It is because of the veneration of these that literature; iconography, music and dance of the masquerades remain in the most archaic least contaminated areas of African culture.⁵⁴

The institution of *Eku* served as an institution of discipline for wayward children. Should any matter be so serious as to defy solution, an appeal or reference could be made to the ancestral temple covering the group. Any decisions taken there through divination and experience of elders as officiating priests would be regarded as final when conveyed by

Ekú-Oba (conveyance of Masquerade order).⁵⁵ In their tradition and customs, offenders were usually presented to this Masquerade to pronounce a verdict based on the nature of the crime committed.⁵⁶ The legal system as operated by Ebira Tao, therefore, was based on *Ekú* (Masquerade, the ancestral spiritual messenger and executioner of justice based on findings from the seers i.e. divination of oracle), and variegated forms of ritual observances including trial by ordeal. Though there was no clear distinction between the judiciary, legislative and executive aspects of pre-colonial Ebira society, decisions were arrived at by the collective resolutions of the heads of each clan. Such actions were in most cases sanctioned and executed by the *Ekú*.⁵⁷

The belief in the *Ekú* institution as an agent for discipline, punishment, execution and deterrence was highly upheld by the Ebira society. The *Iregba* (ancestral temple) served as a place for the *Ekú* to carry out any injunction as might be directed by the chief priest of the ancestral temple, *Ohireba*.⁵⁸ The pre-colonial Ebira society also believed strongly in the power of the masquerade as an ancestor incarnate. Any vices like witchcraft practices and murder of an innocent person would attract the judgement of the Masquerade. For example, a Masquerade called *Adiyaya* owned by the *Esusu* clan usually came out by the order of *Ohindase* (High Priest) to avert any serious allegation of witchcraft affliction. He did this by first detecting who was wrong before taking any action known as *Oyi-Jote*, a process of visiting a house confirmed for the crime. Such visit sometimes has led to the total destruction of some family compound in the past, or the confirmed witches could be banished to a nearby hill or forest. The procession which was usually accompanied by blowing of *Okokoro* (a curved hollow stick) or even a horn to warn everyone on their way to stay clear or the beat of *Opo* drum to depict sorrow and sadness for the departing witch.⁵⁹ If the offence committed was of great consequence, a highly consultative council of elders converged for consultation and deliberated on the issue before ordering the execution of the witch if guilty. The masquerade acting on the order of the gods went ahead with a sharp edge knife to narrate the victim's offence(s) in accordance with the confirmation made through *Eva*(seer) divination. Thereafter, the masquerade beheaded the witch to appease the god at *Iregba*. This act was popularly known in the local dialect as *Ekú'aguoza* which implies a process of beheading offenders, staking them at the cross road (T-junction). After the burial, a special tree called *Okumaba* would be hoisted on their grave as an insignia for a passerby to notice. This phenomenon was described in Ebira oral tradition as *Oyi-ja'aba* (heap as tomb).⁶⁰ The power of the Masquerade as an agent of traditional law enforcement (dispenser of justice) was reduced by the British, as they made it an offence for any Masquerade to kill or punish an offender. Any act of killing by a Masquerade was charged as an act of murder.⁶¹

Another significant function of the *Ekú* culture was during the *Ekú'echi* festival usually celebrated with pomp and pageantry, with a dynamic integration of poetry, chants, mimicry, mime, dance 'mask' and significant cultural symbols.⁶² The period serves as a

thanksgiving feast for the bountiful co-existence and honors of the deities where people seized the occasions to solicit blessings from God or the departed soul. It thus brings people together as a group or individual, strengthening their unity and cohesions and the link between human beings and spirits is renewed despite the two worlds being kept at a healthy distance from each other. ⁶³It was also a period during which the family members that breaches the traditional laws were punished by *Ohi- Ohuoje* (the compound head) along with his male relation, at the *Ete-Ohuoje* (sacred land in the compound), with the belief that the presence of the ancestor would guide them to arrive at the correct decision to be implemented. ⁶⁴

An afternoon masquerade called *akatapa* performs during the night masquerade festival to admonish women for their transgression against their ancestors. They usually prescribed sacrifice where necessary to appease the ancestors. ⁶⁵ Akatapa is both masquerade and *facekuerade*. ⁶⁶ It is known as famine ancestral spirit said to be the female slaves of the domain of the dead and terrible liars. It creates fun through jests and satirical abuses such as prostitution, adultery, vanity, greed, quarrels, theft and soothsaying. ⁶⁷

In the case of an accused murderer, his clan might hand him/her to another party to die a compensatory death known as *UsuOpo'onu* to avert war. ⁶⁸ A good instance was when Onipe one of the children of AttahOmadiivi claimed to be spiritually endowed with power committed murder and yet attempted to kill his father with a poisonous arrow that was averted through the prompt intervention of other children like; Pa Onuja, Animoku and Eyitere who jointly fought Onipe and dislodged him. In the end, he was presented for public execution by his father Omadiivi. ⁶⁹ Similarly, compensation might also be accepted to avert war in case of adultery. Offenders who indulged in such abomination were usually discovered when a woman found it difficult to deliver her baby. With due consultation among the elders, she would be questioned to confess if she had indulged in any adulterous acts with any of her husband's immediate family members. If she confessed her sin, the perpetrator was to be presented to a masquerade for execution as deterrence. ⁷⁰

Y.A. Ibrahim asserted that the masquerade function as exhibited by *Ododo* and *Obaji* (ancestral fathers of Ebira people) was to reform the *Eku* institution that seems to be degenerating. They entrenched the ideas of reform and implement them. The two established ancestral temple *Iregba* in Eika and Okehi are for governance, checking witchcraft, murder and immoral acts. ⁷

Following this concept of masquerade, Ododo Sunday, ⁷² posited that masquerades are the embodiment of spirits of the human performers through whom the spirits access the human world. They derive their strength from the supernatural ordinance and the sacredness that surrounds the mask, the masker and the masquerade. The masquerade, as an entity, is a visual mediation between the mundane world and the ancestral world, the figure fleeting

boundary-crossing between normally distinct categories being.⁷³ The *Ekue-ahire* was the ascension of the spirits of the ancestor (from the underworld) to visit descendants on earth. It was the occasion for the 'risen father' *eku-oba* to deliver messages of the ancestor, give words of wisdom, history and philosophy and settle disputes. The order of staging was Okehi, Eika, Adavi, Okengwe, Ihima, and so on. The *Ekue-ahire* ceremony in Eika was accompanied by the outing of *Ochi'eku*, the ancestral staff of authority of Obaji *okute* which was taken around in Obangede and some other parts of Eikaland on a visit to homes of descendants.⁷⁴ Once *Ekue-ahire* had taken place in Eika-Okehi, all 'child knowing' ceremonies (including divination connected with these), elder's funeral obsequies and all other matters involving the outing of masquerades (as ancestral representatives) were suspended throughout Ebiraland until after the *Ekue'echi* had been stage.⁷⁵

Y. A. Ibrahim recognized the function of the masquerade in the past especially the *Ekue'echi* festivals which seek to settle quarrels, or punishment to offenders. This action he contended usually emanated from *Ekue'oba* who delivered the verdicts to the hearing of women confined to their rooms. They were regarded as beyond question. At individual compound levels throughout *eku'echi* night, the *akatapa* (masquerades personating the spirits of deceased women who thereby referred to one another as 'co-wife' *ohini*) were normally virulent against erring women who were called to order and made to pay fines. The *Ekue'echi* was the occasion to sing against misfits in the society as a deterrent and every masquerade ensured through all means possible that a prima-facie was established before singing against the accused. This was because ancestors were credited with the knowledge of secrets of people on earth and masquerades were regarded as above 'slip of tongue'. In this way masquerade served as an 'infallible press' that enjoyed absolute immunity since whoever challenged anyone in any way over a masquerade song was automatically guilty of a grave offence against the ancestral cult. He concluded that the era of British colonialism degenerated the masquerade press into a state that enable some to sing out malice or at mere prompting by some politicians using them against an opponent.⁷⁶

In essence, the Ebira - Tao instinctively conceptualized masquerade as an ancestral incarnate that served as the source and guardians of the people's ideals and values, which were guided by a set of laws and orders to be kept very strictly by the members of the community. Violation by any member was considered a threat to the harmony between the living society and the ancestors.⁷⁷ As similar to many African beliefs, Ebira considered God too removed physically to cater for their immediate interest and needs. Thus, He was worshipped through the intermediary of the mother earth, *ete*, spirits, *Ori* and the ancestors, *Ohiku*. Empirically this constituted the point of duality and ascription of associates to God. *Ete*, earth, was considered next to God because it was cultivated for livelihood and was the lasting place for everybody. Earth in Ebira traditional religion was considered compassionate, the mother of life and the cause of fortune and misfortune.⁷⁸

Ori, spirit, occupied an important position in the religious life of the Ebara. While Eganyi and Ihima clan groups considered *ori* equal to earth,⁷⁹ other clan groups considered *ori* intermediary, the middle point between god and earth. The homes of *ori* were usually the rocks, streams, and the big trees like the silk cotton tree *uchebe* and Mahogany trees. According to Y. A. Ibrahim, people believed that *ori* could do many things including bringing peace, good luck, rain, good harvest and prosperity. They could also bring fertility to the women and soil; they could ward off epidemics, untimely deaths and foreign invasions. It can prevent witches from dispatching their victims, for it is believed that before the witches dispatch their victim they must first take him before the *ori* as a matter of course.⁸⁰ The people monitored the moods of *ori* usually through divination, *eva*. The scorers, *ovavo* prescribed and sometimes accepted sacrifices, *isovo* from the consultants on behalf of *ori*.⁸¹

The ancestors, Ohiku were not worshipped parse; they were venerated and invoked in order to attract their constant cooperation and favour. The Ebara cosmology did not deny the participation of the dead in the world of the ancestral spirit. The living had a sense of dependence on their ancestors. It was believed that the ancestors were constantly watching over their relatives still alive and punishing those who abuse customs. In most cases, heads of families, lineages and kindred imposed sanctions and adjudicate on both spiritual and secular affairs only on behalf of the ancestors.⁸²

Conclusion

The masquerade has been around us for a long time. They are still very much with us. Thus, either from the point of view of their modern adaptations, or of their ancient roles in the cultural life and social history of Nigerian populations they do not go away. The historical interest in the masquerade springs from the reality of its belongingness to the indigenous socio-political systems, of which it is often chosen as a symbol. In its surviving aspects we can still see the complexity of the role the masquerade plays in society and thus note the reality of these functions which are cited in specific traditional historical contexts.

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