

THE EFFECTS OF SOUND AND DARKNESS: PECULIAR ELEMENTS IN THE IGBO NIGHT MASK TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the interesting ramifications of the Igbo masquerade and masking tradition (mmonwu) as an age-old institution that complements, guides, accompanies, and represents as a microcosm, the macrocosmic space of the Igbo nation and psyche. It goes further into the more reclusive night mask (mmonwu abani) aspect of the institution by relying on the qualitative approach and through interviews, observation and participant observation, brings out the crucial role of certain elements in its actualisation and practice. Thus, the elements of sound and darkness are identified, described and explored as pivotal indices in this peculiar tradition of the night time bereft of the costume covering of disguise and aesthetics – the mask – which is indispensable in its daytime counterpart in the Igbo masquerade culture.

Key words: Mask, Night Mask, Mmonwu, Mmonwu Abani, Sound, Darkness, Igbo

The Igbo Mask: Introduction and Background

The Igbo have a rich cultural heritage. The masking or mask institution is one of the most haloed, revered and sacred because it involves ancestral spirits. These ancestral spirits seen as concrete manifestations of the otherworldly existence are held in spiritual awe, regard, respect and deference. The Igbo ontological underpinnings lend substance and credibility to the ancestral mask tradition because the dead, the living and the unborn are in mutual proximity and coexistence. Therefore, ancestral masks every now and then are called up or on their own accord, visit the land of the living in covered or shrouded forms, loaded with ancestral wisdom and spiritual mannerisms during festivals (communal or individual) that range from harvest, community communions, ritual feasts, funerals, burials, dance festivals and remembrances.

According to Nnabuenyi Ugonna in his *Mmonwu: A Dramatic Tradition of the Igbo*, an ancestral mask is basically seen as an ancestor come-back-to-life and has to be held sacrosanct. Nevertheless, due to the varying perspectives of different Igbo communities, masks or *mmonwu* could be viewed as the following or akin to these:

- a. A mask with supernatural powers, regarded as a visible spirit in the community and accorded all spiritual awe and respect.
- b. A spirit coming from the underground in a masked form;
- c. A spirit masked deified, sacrosanct and not to be touched or approached by humans, inhabiting under the ground and
- d. An age-old form of mask supposed to come to man's world from the spirit world. (2)

The views of Ugonna above similar and slightly confusing as they may be, underline an important aspect of Igbo cosmology, ontology and belief system. It is actually

Raymond Arazu in his foreword to Augustine Onyeneke's seminal study, *The Dead Among the Living: Masquerades in Igbo Society*, that captures the idea and makes comprehension of the mmonwu or ancestral mask phenomenon easier and clearer.

It is Onyeneke's insistence that "every masquerade, mmonwu, is typically taken to mean a perceptible spirit of the dead in general without any attempt to identify it with any particular dead individual that puts him in conflict with the position of Nnabuenyi Ugonna's *Mmonwu*.... For Ugonna "the term mmonwu is restricted to a unique type of drama featuring masked characters generally regarded as 'spirits' and therefore does not apply to all and every performance in which masked figures feature" (p. 1). Onyeneke captures the Igbo genius or spirit in the mmanwu phenomenon and makes it the title of his work – *The Dead*.... The masquerade in Igbo tradition is the direct result of the Igbo man's belief in life after death. (vi)

So, the basic notion is anchored on the view that the mask, masquerade, mmonwu, *mmanwu*, etc among the Igbo are actually ancestral spirits manifesting among the living as (ancestral) masks. Interestingly, their visitations are not a monotonous humdrum float-by appearance related to zombie animations nor are they merely entertainingly carnivalesque; instead, their preoccupations range from executive village/community policing by ensuring law and order, to socialization through initiations and entertainment via dance, play and mimicry. They also ensure gender demarcation and differentiation as their practice (masking) is mostly an all-male affair (Onyeneke 75-89). On the entertainment perspective, Chike Okoye in his *The Mmonwu Theatre: Igbo Poetry of the Spirits*, has this to say:

A masquerade performance is basically traditional Igbo theatre. The kinetics and mnemonics that accompany the drama, the emphatic movements to and fro, the forward dashes and abrupt stops, the affirmative nods and disagreeing shakes of the head, the dignified slow-spins, the dance steps and the mainstream chants, narratives and songs are symbiotically aligned to the third accompaniment: music, or its equivalent. Those responsible for this third aspect could also be part of the mask's dance-drama. (4)

Another interesting aspect of the ancestral mask tradition is that of nomenclature. What exactly do the Igbo call ancestral masks? First of all, there are traditions of Igbo masking more or less based on community clusters and geographical peculiarities. Ancestral spirits or masks are known by various names among the different major communities of the Igbo because of their various variations of mask traditions. For example, the northern Igbo of the Nsukka region bordering with the Igala people practice the *Odo* and *Omabe* mask tradition. These masks are closely linked with deities as votaries of the gods and are seen religiously as representatives of the deities they are attached to. This religious association is also applied to the riverine south-western Igbo of the Niger region where they are known as the *Owu* and *Okorosha* and linked to *Echere*, a water deity. According to Onyeneke,

...the goddess 'Echere' is venerated at night. An Owu masquerade ... is raised at the shrine and is inducted by the pilgrims from the shrine....These masquerades dance to music and they do not talk. They play for about four market weeks and retire, thereby making room for a swarm of youthful masquerades of various types called (the) Okorosha. (34)

Towards the south-east of the Igbo, the areas bordering the Efik and Ibibio ethnicities, is another different system. This tradition, situated in the Ngwa and Bende parts of Igboland and influenced by the Cross River communities is known as *Ekpe*, *Ekpo*, *Okonko*, etc. They are linked with political power, its execution and influence. Being highly secretive, people associate it with the macabre and violence and also operates with the secret *nsibidi* secret password system.

Incidentally, the central Igbo of the Awka-Nri-Ekwulobia axis practice the tradition known as 'mmonwu', same as its linguistic variant *mmanwu*. It is important to note here that according to Okoye, the variation, *mmanwu*, is purely a linguistic affair among the various Igbo communities of the said axis. This is in opposition to Meki Nzewi's theory that the said variation has deeper semantic implications than a mere elision or vowel switch/glide. Okoye's view:

They (Nzewi) hold that *mmanwu* is a combination of *mma* (beauty) and *onwu* (death), hence 'mmanwu' (beauty in death), as opposed semantically to *mmadu* (beauty in life; that is, human being).... But a more feasible explanation is that the terms 'mmonwu' and *mmuo* should not be confused because certain dialects of Igbo refer to the former term with the latter. This should be seen as a case of dialect variation. Inclusive in this confusion of dialects is the word 'mmanwu'; which is more in line with the main term 'mmonwu' than the semantically different 'mmuo'.... We are much more interested in *mmonwu* which is more probably a shortened derivative from the expression *mmuo ndi nwuru anwu* (spirits of the dead). The seriousness of the expression and the mystic aura haloing it is what gives the *mmonwu* type of mask its feared and dreaded position in the mask tradition. This is a more plausible explanation than the previous notion of 'mmanwu' over 'mmonwu'. (6-7)

Allied Literatures: General

The mask institution is an old one among the Igbo whose secrecy of nature and operation was a formidable quality albeit not so much as it is today; having been watered down by the corrosive effects of civilisation and modernisation. The early missionaries and white imperial forces and authorities involved in the colonisation process of the lower 'tribes' of the Niger (of which the Igbo was and is still the most notable ethnic group) made anthropological researches and reports of the veritable tradition. These Britons, armed with the authority of the church and the British force of administration most especially, could easily coerce out the secrets of the mask practice

and cult thereby effectively demystifying right in front of the people, a once dreaded and revered social institution of control and enforcement. The people's erstwhile belief (especially uninitiated males, women and children) in the mystical, supernatural, and overly efficacious powers of the mask practically came to naught in the face of the white man's onslaught. The colonial forces practically reduced in a very drastic manner the myth surrounding the mask institution. It was obvious they were not impressed by what the natives believed about their own culture and the sneer is not lost in some of their reports. An example is this by G.T. Basden, a pastor of the CMS in his work *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*,

The Iboman undoubtedly thinks that the ceremony of making maw has somehow transformed the man and endowed him with extraordinary qualities. Moreover by virtue of the unassailable status of a spirit, a maw was "onye-nwe-obodo" an equivalent title for our 'Lord of creation'. (237)

Other colonial researchers and anthropologists continued to document on the tradition and here Onyeneke paraphrases G. I. Jones' important findings in his "Masked Plays of South-Eastern Nigeria":

G. I. Jones reported as a District Officer. He underlined the three common elements in the masquerades of south eastern Nigeria, which were always mixed together: (a) the religious and magical elements where supernatural and religious awe are attributed to masquerades; (b) the disciplinary element where secrecy is maintained and initiation formalities are demanded; (c) pageantry and display in so far as masquerades provide an enjoyable show and spectacle.... For him, the institution was undergoing a serious transition in Igboland: "today, masked plays with much secrecy or religious ritual have died out in the more sophisticated communities and those of a spectacular nature remain" (1945, 199). (6)

The reasons for the 'dying-out' is traceable to the fact that the Christian minions and the British administration saw the mask institution with its attendant powers of religious and civil control as a veritable challenge and potential clog of clashes, and would not also want any use of violence or force by any other group against another under their watch. According to M.D.W. Jeffrey's paper, "The Bull Roarer Among the Ibo" in *African Studies*,

Complaints of murder, of violence and of destruction of property brought before the District Officers during the mmo season resulted in posse of police arresting and publicly de-masking the mmo members, thus shattering locally the awe in which the society was held. Under such a political hostile environment, the power of the mmo died: its ability to hold Ibo society together, ...has gone, never to return. (23)

From the above, it is obvious that the death knell had tolled for the mask institution's religious and political power; and the toll was continually pervasive to the end. Nevertheless, just as other aspects of the tradition remained, especially elements bordering on entertainment so do we have a few researchers worthy of mention here before we conclude on this era of early scholars. C.K. Meek in his report as a colonial anthropologist in the Nsukka division saw the Odo and Omabe types of masks as those of outstanding importance, useful to the legal system of the area. J.S. Boston's "Some Northern Igbo Masquerades" captures towards the twilight of the colonial era in Nigeria, mask systems of the Umueri, Nri and Awka axes and made findings on the genres, magical powers and the night mask category. Onuora Nzekwu, sounding very much like the colonial writers made the important move of unveiling the long-held secret of the masks' distorted voice contraption in his "Masquerade" in *Nigeria Magazine* (1960 Independence Edition), despite being an indigenous writer.

Later on, a flurry of an elite and equally educated crop of indigenous writers took up the task of writing on the masking institution but did not maintain the tenor of the typical colonial researcher. Being in full cognizance of the nuances, values and taboos surrounding masks and their operations, and belonging to the culture that owns the tradition made them more sensitive and concerned about the life of the institution and the respect it deserves. This feeling, academic disposition, and frame of mind probably led to their studying certain aspects more thoroughly and bringing such to the fore. According to Onyeneke,

Study themes on the masquerade of this...phase moved away from poking at the internal and secret mechanism of its performance and concentrated on phenomenological analyses of the shape, form, dance, song and dramatic qualities manifested in the performance session of the masquerade. (8)

The first researches of this ilk concerned themselves mostly with the mask manifestation as a veritable form of indigenous theatre. They saw most mask outings as drama; not necessarily the exact construct of European understanding of theatre but nevertheless a theatre of its own with acting and mimesis at the centre of mask festivals. M. J. C. Echeruo's paper, "The Dramatic Limits of the Igbo Ritual" in 1973 traced the structure of mask episodes and suggested patterns of Igbo drama based on these local traditions if they be moved further from their ritual content and trappings. Nnabuenyi Ugonna in his aptly titled *Mmonwu: A Dramatic Tradition of the Igbo* apart from his contentious classification of the *mmonwu oza ebuna* as *mmonwu* and other masks as ordinary play, nevertheless takes a bold step as he efficiently proves that the mask of the Igbo is actually dramatic. He maintains that certain mask types ranging from the *eze mmonwu* (king mask) to the *akakpo mmonwu* (dwarf mask) are actually lead actors in an open arena (*obom*) with their chants and songs containing poeticisms. However, Ugonna makes another disputatious claim by stating that the presence of a wooden mask as part of the costume renders a mask non-spiritual; therefore not an *mmonwu*. For him, ancestral masks do not have wooden mask costumes. But in apologist fairness, one could say that most of his findings are informed and influenced by his study of the Ozubulu area of the Igbo.

James Amankulor also takes the mask dramatic elements establishment further by studying the *Ekpe* group of masks among the Ngwa, and the *Odo* type of the northern Igbo of Nsukka. He makes it clear that these are actually examples of a deliberate, elaborate and complete African theatre. Ossie Enekwe in his *Igbo Masks: The Oneness of Ritual and Theatre* establishes further similar proof of drama for the Igbo mask; but also leans considerably on the issue of ritual and the supernatural embedded in most mask activities. He has this to say:

Before a performance, an animal that the particular spirit to be represented likes is usually identified by the *dibia* and sacrificed. Its blood is spilled on the mask to which magical objects and talismans are attached. (78)

And hastens to add:

But sacrifice and magic alone do not activate the occult and strange powers in masks. The performer plays a major role in making tangible the imagined presence of the dead or the supernatural. The masked performance is, therefore, a perfect union of active religious and magical faith with human skill and ingenuity. (79)

Okoye in his *The Mmonwu Theatre* explains further:

Enekwe is saying here that the supernatural element is an indispensable ingredient in the masking mix. People have to be held in awe of it, ...(the mask) might be held in nothing if the fear of possible harm in the African *juju* way is not remotely probable. (25)

Simon Ottenberg's essay, "The Analysis of an African Play" and book, *Masked Rituals of Afikpo: The Context of an African Art*, also reiterate that the Igbo mask performance especially the *Okumkpo* mask of Afikpo is a full play. With its brief acts, songs and pantomime, it is moulded in the design of a morality play touching on the virtue of general humaneness of the inhabitants of the community. They are comic reliefs and harbingers of continuity for traditional norms and values.

Chike Aniakor's "The Igbo *Ijele* Mask" takes a different tack from drama but all the same sets out to prove the existence of symbolic order in the seeming disorder and meaninglessness of mask external physiognomy cum aesthetics of costume. For Basden, there is nothing artistic or symbolic about mask appearances. Everything is weird. But Aniakor in an intelligent and informed manner makes us understand that the *Ijele's* size, colour mixes and combinations in costume, visual motifs, dignified and majestic movement are all components of a deliberate and elaborate high-class art. Fundamentally, in his "Igbo Art as an Environment: The Example of Mask Headdresses", he has this to say:

This is the Igbo practice of using mask headdresses to define a number of important themes in masking such as (i) the underlying unity of the Igbo world as embodied in the social ideals of masking at village or town level (ii) that what mask types and characterisations seek to restate within performance about a society, the Igbo have done through the use of mask headdresses (iii) attributes of the mask which are perceivable through the agencies

of musical instrumentation including songs can easily be seen in the structural configuration of the Igbo mask headdresses (iv) through the use of complex mask headdresses, the Igbo bring into close social and functional relations, the world of the living, the dead, the forest, rivers and other elemental forces, all revolving around man as the supreme agent in the cosmic mission. (*Nigeria Magazine* 91)

Lengthy as it may appear, Aniakor says it the best way possible for clarification. He goes further to illustrate the deliberate artistry of the destructive and forceful *Agaba* headdress which features a leopard or lion in mix with horns to indicate heroism and bravery; and more often than not the supreme place of man is showcased by placing a human figure atop the structure. Again, using the *Ijele* which is regarded all around Igbo as the leading mask, he underscores its monumentality and adds this: “*Ijele* is also a leading spirit and embodies their collectivity which is also that of humans, on its headdress it bears all noted Igbo masks, a factor that heightens its mystical aura” (96).

A. O. Onyeneke in his sociological survey, *The Dead Among the Living: Masquerades in Igbo Society*, tries to situate and underscore the importance of masks in Igbo society with the stance that a better understanding of the mask institution (which is a microcosm of sorts) will guarantee a better insight into the dynamics of the Igbo society. Therefore, his study presents the view that unlike previous perceptions about the mask institution having three major functions (that is, religious, governmental and social/entertainment), that there is another important function; that of being an index of social values and community consensus designed according to him, “to ensure a successful preservation and continuation of the existing and living community...(and) the external manifestation of these in a symbolic action is the masquerade” (17).

The Concept of the Night Mask and the Elements of Sound and Darkness

Onyeneke actually makes an important note that is of a more direct value to this essay; and that is concerning night masks. The Igbo mask as has been shown earlier is variously known dialectally as *mmonwu*, *odo*, *omabe*, *okorocha*, *ekpe*, *okonko*, *mmuo*, etc (Onyeneke 15) depending on the geographical and cultural inclinations of the particular Igbo community, is broadly categorised into two parts or aspects: those that are visible and perform during the day, and those that are ‘invisible’ and perform solely at night. The night mask which is generally known as *Mmonwu Abani* (“masks of the night”) is reclusive and its secrets more closely guarded; often requiring a second initiation of already initiated members of the mask cult. This night category is broken down into sub-genres also known variously for the same reasons mentioned above as *ayaka*, *onyekulum*, *ajikwu*, *ogbaagu*, etc (Onyeneke 21, 22). In a brief expose, he (Onyeneke) observes that the invisible (night masks) rely on sounds in order to be felt and enforce their inaccessibility to view by either “screening it off from view within an enclosure or else by forcing the audience to hide itself within a house enclosure so as not to appear outdoors where the sound source could be seen” (21). He further divides the invisible (night masks) into (a) *achikwu/ayaka/onye kulu ya* whose presence is felt through their screams, rattles and music instruments. They could operate on two basic modes – protective surveillance and / or strong executive actions such as punishing or even killing; (b) the *agu mmuo* (tiger spirit) which is the bull-roarer marked by its

reverberating loud and strong grumbling sound; (c) the *ogbagu*; which to quote Onyeneke verbatim are,

...(a) group of night masquerades (that) are strictly for dance entertainment and are not part of the village guard system. It is ... they (that) often play at the compound affected at funerals of members and their dependants. An *ogbagu* performance in the Aguata area is considered an entertainment dance play of a leopard family. (22-24)

Ossie Enekwe also contributes to the literature on night mask when he says that "...Ayaka masks...appear only at night" (80). He maintains that the community to play host to the Ayaka is adequately warned not to come out because they are not to be seen save for the adult male initiates of the mask cult. He declares authoritatively: "Voice is the centre of Ayaka drama: no masks are worn" (81). He goes ahead to describe the audial spectacle of the Ayaka:

By means of sound created by highly trained voices, voice disguisers, ankle rattles, a netted calabash, studded with cowries and nuts (worn by the leader of the group), and bull-roarers (*odegili-gili*), the maskers create a ghostly atmosphere which makes the blood of the initiated and uninitiated alike tingle with fear.... the Ayaka speak a peculiar language, which is supposed to be that of spirits,.... (81)

Nevertheless, the language peculiarity does not get obscure enough to prevent the Ayaka from performing lampooning functions according to Enekwe. This is because in the absence of light, complete darkness and under the cover of night, "Ayaka, the nocturnal mask ...also satirizes(sic) social deviants" (113).

For Cyril Ike in *Footprints of a Sage* edited by R. U. Uzoezie, he believes that night mask dance steps are mystically revealed hence its strange uniqueness. Practically, and from his personal and community's (Igbo Ukwu) perspective, Ike groups the Ajikwu night masquerade troupe into these:

1. The Omenikolo – powerful and dreaded leaders
2. Isimkpi – (Goat head) fights intruders with its pair of horns.
3. The Oguagba – Makes blood chilling incantations; he dictates the tune the twin soloists take up.
4. The dancing group.
5. The Agu Mmanwu – invisible-man-eating spirit. (You only hear his bone crushing timber voice.) (107)

He also delineates the Ajikwu night mask into – *Ajikwu Ohia*, which he maintains is untamed, dreaded and is mostly known for "...track(ing) down dangerous and poisonous men and women in the village and hand(ing) down them their jungle type judgements (109)", and *Ajikwu Uno*. This second group (Ajikwu Uno) he says is also known as Ayaka in some places and further places under it other sub-groups namely; (a) *Mmanwu Abani* proper: known for its moving music and satirical innuendoes; (b) *Ajikwu Ikpo/Oganigwe*: marked by their heavy attire, simple and rhythmic music; (c) The *Ogbagu*: scantily clad, fast, powerful, acrobatic and monotonous in music; (d)

Onyekulum: demoniac, single, wicked, curses, prophecies and creates sound illusions of distance and proximity; and the (e) *Agummonwu*, which he says is highly technically developed, is formless and known for its thunderlike and rumbling voice. “It introduces the emergence of the Ajikwu night masquerade” (111)

For Ogonna Anaagudo-Agu in “Igbo Night Masquerade Theatre as a Prototype of the Modern Radio”, he states emphatically that “...night masquerades have only audio appeal,...the night masquerade subsists on silence (of the night), sound and sound effects” (460). However, Anaagudo-Agu makes an interesting though unlikely observation when he declares that

There are various types of night masquerades depending on locality. So far a range of four or five of them have (sic) been identified namely: *Onyekulum* and *Ayaka* at Onitsha district, including *Umuoji* and *Oba*; *Okuluji* at Nnobi; and *Osulugwogwo* at Aguleri districts. (460)

Obviously, his claims might be justified if the scope of his research is put into consideration. As has been seen earlier, other wide-flung literatures suggest otherwise and a lot more. However, he makes other interesting observations in his brief description of the *Ayaka* sub-genre of the night mask tradition:

Take *Ayaka* for instance: composed of strong men armed with spears and medicine, they come out at night at about 11.00 pm and disappear again before dawn. They summersault in the air, climb trees, beat drums and sing in disguised voices from heights in order to create the impression of being air-borne ghosts. Useful for creating sound effects are the *odu achalla*, a speech device and the bull roarer used only by these night performers to produce perspectives of speed and space-effects. Other sound instruments are the wooden and metal gongs, (*uvie* and *ogene*), all of which come together to produce a weird and unearthly musical effect. (460)

The Igbo tradition of the night mask shares basics such as respect, reverence and regard like its day counterpart; but there is more – it is dreaded and more restricted as per audience. In the central Igbo area of Anambra State where its practice is more common and preponderant, there are three major sub-genres of the tradition; practised mostly along geographical cum traditional community cluster lines. Southern Anambra of the *Aguata* and *Orumba* areas are known for the *Ogbagu* night mask while the northern Anambra of *Oyi* and *Ayamelum* regions are popular for the *Ayaka* brand. The central area of *Anaocha* and its environs are home to the *Ajikwu* variant of the tradition. This demarcation and spread is neither strict nor binding. There are constant and widespread overlapping which many a time almost negates the above classification. One can easily find a community in any of the broad areas having a functional and lively inter-existence of the three major types of night mask operating at various times. However, this “classification” is informed by popularity and preponderance.

The basic principle underlying the night mask is its secretiveness, its exclusivity and its sheer adherence to the verisimilitude and simulation of eerie otherworldliness. For

the ignorant and uninitiated, the audial manifestations are the most terrible, fearsome, and the weirdest experiences they can ever imagine. The eerie, howling and deft manipulations of sound which enhance the spirit and ghoulish manifestations of their existence and operations are actually made possible by three main contraptions. This first is an about three inches long, hollow, cylindrical, reed-like device covered on both ends with polythene material (or a special type of spider web, or bat-wing skin) with a lateral slit around the middle, placed on the mouth. This device is a type of sonovox (*okpili* or *odu achalla* in Igbo) that distorts the voice when spoken or screamed into, giving it a guttural, grating texture supposed to be that of ancestral spirits. It effectively masks individual voices making the actuators virtually unidentified when they speak. Used in unison, it gives the impression of rumbling, grating voice-like sounds.

The second major device is the bull-roarer (*agu mmuo*, *agu mmonwu*, *agu mmanwu* or *ode giligili* in Igbo).s This device ranging in length as from 15cm to about 40cm and about three to five inches in width is plain, flat wood or bamboo that has a rope attached and wound around it in spring-loaded twists and turns that when released, make the device spin around itself giving off light reverberating sounds. It is then swung by the user in varying arcs away from him. The vibration and reverberation of the device as it spins and cuts through the air in arcs give a very deep, rumbling, fearsome sound that appears to “breathe” as it maintains alternating sound frequencies. It has been in use in many ancient civilisations around the world for spiritual, ritual, worship, etc purposes. Night masks use the bull-roarer to establish their presence.

The third major device is the rattle and the rattle-gourd; and is known as the *ichaka*, *abia*, *ekpili* in Igbo. The rattle itself (*ekpili*, *abia*) is tied around the feet (ankle) of the actuators while the rattle-gourd (*ichaka*, *abia*) is held in the hand(s) or tied with an elastic rope to the palm. Measured and rhythmical stomping and stamping of the feet and accompanying shakes and strikes of the rattle-gourds give the impression of heavily-clad, earth-shattering swarms of spirits. As many as forty night mask actuators all “armed” with rattles and rattle-gourds, operating on cue and in unison definitely make a spine-tingling impression during the inscrutable darkness of night.

Night time is as mysterious and as inscrutable as the human terror-prone imagination can go; especially in contexts that are rural and in this case, African. The choice of night time for operation and activity of the night masks heightens the sense of dread and trepidation with which it is held. The choice of night is functional in many aspects. The daytime mask counterpart applies varying degrees of concealing costumes ranging from body paint to cloth, wood and even metal in order communicate symbolically and enhance the mask’s character, message and mission (Aniakor, Nigeria Magazine 91-97). But a major and important reason for concealing costumes is to disguise and mask the identity of the mask actuator (Amankulor 54). This need to disguise through masking the identities of the maskers is taken care of by the element of darkness provided by night itself. Little wonder that members of the night mask always abhor any form of light during their operations. This is recorded in Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* where Obika as the Ogbazuluobodo night mask of the Ayaka sub-genre shouts ‘*Ewo okuo!*’ ‘*Ewo okuo!*’ (light! light!) as a warning for people to extinguish any noticeable light (*Arrow* 223). Any form of costume worn by the night mask is therefore

scanty, if any at all, and is not necessarily for concealment (since they are already concealed by darkness); but to enhance the symbolism and dramatic message of the dreadful night spirits they represent.

Sound plays a significant role in the daytime mask operations among the Igbo as basically a component of music, linguistic and para-linguistic expression and communication. But with the night mask it is applied deftly as a significant indication of the presence and essence of the mask being; in addition to its elemental importance in the night mask music. The combination of all the sound devices mentioned earlier – rattles, sonovox, and bull-roarer – all contribute to its music; but most importantly announce continually the presence of the dreaded spirits of the night. The darkness of the night itself enhances the spirit and ghoulish ambience and provides a smooth and effective medium for the amplification and conduction of sound over long distances and wide areas. This is partly due to the fact that night time in rural Igbo land is relatively quiet. The elements of sound and darkness in peculiar applications are markedly pivotal to the effective actuation of the Igbo night mask.

Conclusion

The mask, masquerade or mmonwu institution among Igbo is an age-old tradition of ancestral spirit representation by human manipulators or actuators. All varieties share the qualities of being feared, respected, revered, and held sacrosanct and in awe by the people. But the degrees of these differ depending on the type of mask involved. Among masks that operate during the day, varieties range from entertaining to ritual and ancestral. But masks that operate at night are generally dreaded though they are also known to lampoon and satirize social miscreants through songs, chants and call-and-response patterns. Again, they are known to summarily execute serious criminals and offenders under the cover of night. Their presence and manifestation however, is made peculiarly dreadful and eerie not as a result of fearsome aesthetics (like those found in terror masks of the daytime; eg *Agaba*, *Mgbedike*, etc), but on adroit applications and manipulations of the elements of sound and darkness. Their combination of special instruments of sound in the cover and assistance of night time darkness marks them apart from their day mask counterparts. As the cover of darkness defeats and supersedes the need for concealing costumes, sound combines with night to make their presence superlatively palpable.

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