

MASQUERADES AND KOLA-NUT CULTURE IN IGBOLAND: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE IGBO SOCIOCULTURAL PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Culture is the totality of people's way of life developed in their attempt to meet the challenges of their environment. Among the Igbo people of South-east Nigeria, various cultures abound. Of great significance is the Masquerade and kola-nut culture. Both cultures play crucial role in shaping and guiding the people's world view. Basically, both cultures in Igbo tradition and rendition unite the people. Although colonialism and Christianity have influenced both cultures, they are still revered and treated with dignity among the people. The paper concludes that in spite of foreign intrusion on masquerade and kola-nut culture, they are still held in very high esteem as the people's traditional cultural values.

Key Words: Culture, Igboland, Kola-nut, Continuity, Masquerade.

Introduction

Throughout the creation of human, man has always belonged to one particular society or another, which may be either where the individual was born into or where he grew up. However, either of them, he acquires from the society its culture, which is what differentiates one group from the other. Indeed, culture has different connotations to different scholars and peoples. Hence it has been defined variously as a “Learned behaviour, abstraction from behaviour, something that exists only in the mind, and observable things and events in the external world”.¹ Culture defined as a complex whole includes knowledge, belief, art, moral laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.² Generally, culture has been defined as “the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempt to meet the challenges of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organization, thus distinguishing “a people from their neighbours”.³

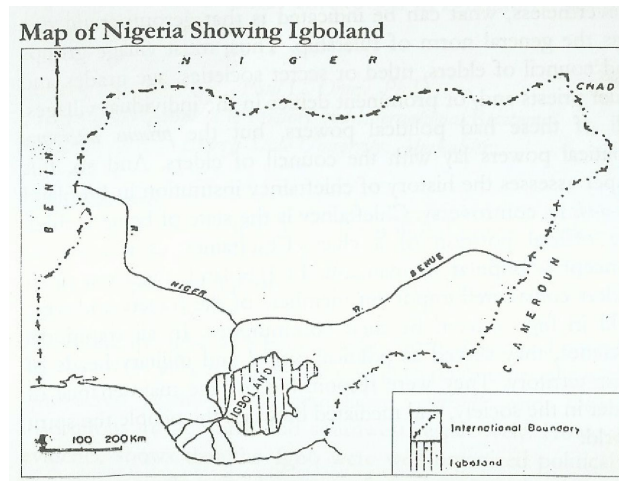
Basically, culture is a survival system adopted by a given people in a given area at a given. Thus, it has to do with the totality of a people's way of life. Culture includes religion, dances, arts / craft, traditions and customs, folklore, games celebrations among others.

Nigeria has many cultures. They include Hausa culture, Yoruba culture, Itsekiri, Fulani, Igala, Igbo, Jukun, Edo, Tiv, Birom Kanuri and Kalabari cultures and so on. Also, among the Igbo people of South-east Nigeria, many cultures exist. Prominent among them include marriage, dance, festivals and masquerades. Of great importance is the masquerade culture. Then too, in Igboland, Kola-nut plays a great role in the people's culture. Indeed, in Igboland, Kola-nut is revered as a symbolic instrument, for peace, conflict resolution and harmony and is at the heart of invariably all forms of human interaction. It is strategic in the social, religious, ritual and communion observances of the Igbo people.⁴ The paper x-rays the masquerades and kola-nut culture, its continuity and change following the infiltration of foreign influences in Igboland.

Geographical Location of Igboland

The term Igbo has been described in pre-historic times as Heebo, Eboe, Ibo and Hickbous. The Igbo here refer to the people who inhabit the Southeast geo-political zone of Nigeria as well as to those in Ikwerreland of Rivers State and the Igbo West of the Niger in Delta State.⁵ The Igbo enclave accommodate the areas extending to Ibibio, Igala, Idoma and Tiv.⁶ Igboland is that part of Nigeria inhabited by the Igbo speaking. It is in the forest belt area and lies between the Cross River east of the Niger and Benin West of the Niger, and between the Igala in the north and the Niger Delta states in the south.⁷ The majority of the inhabitants are in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States. The rest Igbo people live in Ahoada area of Rivers state and the Asaba, Ika, Ukwuani (Kwale) and Aboh areas of Delta state. They are among the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. The exact date or dates of Igbo settlement in the areas they inhabit is uncertain. However, it is certain that the settlement had been on thousands of years before the nineteenth century. For instance, archaeological evidence, notably that of Thurstan Shaw, confirms that settlement was already on by the ninth century A.D.⁸

Map of Nigeria showing Igboland



Source: I.R. Ozigbo; A History of Igboland in 20th Century, p. x

Masquerades in Igbo Culture and Society

In Igboland, Masquerade which literally means “*Muo*” (spirit being) has many names; they include *mmonwu*, *mmanwu*, *mmo* (*mmaw*), *mma* etc depending on the dialect of the Igbo group adopted. Masquerades generally are known as *Mmonwu* or *Mmuo* in Igboland; meaning spirits in a visible form or simply put spirits. In particular regions and localities of Igboland, different kinds of masquerade bear specific names. Masquerade as a traditional cultural heritage is enclosed in a Mask. A mask is a disguising dress, which hides the personal identity of the one who wears it. A masquerade is a public display and performance of a masked actor as he strives to present in his action the new identity which is created and expressed in the fashion of the mask adopted.⁹ In Igboland, masquerade presents deep seated cultural ideas and forms of Igbo social organization. These are firstly, the Igbo view of world order, its cosmology; secondly, the structure of social organization and control. This cosmology includes the overriding authority of spirits and the will of dead ancestors on the present living generation.¹⁰ The veneration attached to the masquerade institution is built on these, and its desecration is seen as the violation of cultural values.

It is not known when the practice of masquerade began in Igboland. Thus, it is as old as the community where it is practiced. Hence, most of the communities contend that they were born into a social system where the mask institution was already in existence. What they needed was to learn the customs and practices attached to it and then to try to pass the same on to the generation following them without must change. However, systematic studies of the

masquerade in Igboland give opposed opinions in the origin of masquerade institution. One opinion is that, it is something imported into Igboland especially from the ethnic groups who form the immediate Igbo neighbours. However, those who are opposed to this opinion see the institution as a genuine cultural development of the Land.¹¹ Different variants of masquerade exist in various regional sections of Igboland. In the Niger riverine of the Southern Igbo, such as Ihiala, the Owu and Okoroshia prevail and in the South-eastern region around the Cross River, such as Arochukwu, the Ekpo and Ekpe dominate. In the northern part of Igboland bordering on the Nsukka region and Nsukka culture area, the variations are of *Mmonwu*, *Odo* and *Omabe*.

A basic distinction to be made in the range of Igbo masquerades is between what should be described as the visible and invisible masquerades. The visible masquerade has visual shapes and forms which are presented to be seen and watched irrespective of whether or not they emit sounds. Whether their shapes are attractive or disgusting, frightening or pleasant; they are meant to be visually experienced by the audience.¹² By the invisible, are meant those masquerades which when presented are not meant to be seen by the audience and are particularly those of them who are uninitiated.

In Igboland, three types of invisible masquerades exist. The first group is the nocturnal masquerades. They move about the community at night as guards, and as a security system. They take over the village community as their arena from the time the human inhabitants should be considered to have retired to their homes to rest. Night time or darkness is their daytime. And they must retire to their own rest by day-break. They play therefore, in the dead of night and require absolute silence and total blackout from the human residents. The second group of the invisible masquerades is the *Agu Mmou* (the tiger spirit). They are the bull roarers and produce a strong grumbling sound,--- the sound vibrations which come from a forest, a lonely bush or a secret enclosure. This normally represents the leading force of the night masquerades and heightens as well as confirms their strong invisible force. The third group of night masquerades are strict for dance entertainment and are not part of the village guard system. They often play at the compound or house of a deceased during funerals.

However, the invisible masquerades by and large are those not meant to be seen, and hence can never be portrayed in any photographs. Indeed, invisible masquerades can strike a lot of

terrors in the minds of the children, the uninitiated and women.¹³ If invisible masquerades want to perform by day, cult enclosures is enforced on the uninitiated members so as to prevent the people from coming outdoors and hence coming face to face with what essentially is meant to be an invisible and spiritual display. This is the case for the “enclosure days” enforced for special days in the Omaba and Odo seasons in the Igbo-Odo and Igbo – Omaba areas of the northern Igboland area of Nsukka.¹⁴ Basically, masquerades in Igboland represent high degree of cultural values in Igbo social system.

In Igboland, every community has masquerade or masquerades Thus, every Igbo community whether at the village – group, village or major lineage level occasionally observe festival They are public celebrations of events considered important and of high value by the community. As the Igbo traditional society is deeply religious, every event worth public attention and celebration by the community tends to have some religious value or divinity attached to it. And so, it is with the masquerades culture in Igboland.

Then too, the masquerade serves the special function of differentiating the male from the female in Igbo society. Everywhere in Igboland, it is the exclusive function of the male, while the female are always excluded, even where a female character is portrayed in the masking. But a few cases exist where special concessions are made for a few women to be closely connected with the masquerade display such as in Nri and Ozubulu areas etc. In these cases, women or young girls are permitted to be close enough to join in and support the song chorus needed for dance of the masquerade.¹⁵

Outside a permitted session in their village masquerade troupe, they must continue to run away as the rest of the women from masquerade. However in few cases, some women are directly initiated into masquerade system. The main reason for excluding women from the system is that it is a symbolic re-enactment of the social structure of the land, which is principally vested on the male gender. Igbo traditional society is strongly organize around male chauvinism.

In Igboland, Masquerade perform several functions. They serve as security agents, and civil strives among community members are also regulated through the activities of the

masquerade. Most importantly, the masquerade is a wonderful form of recreational entertainment in Igboland.

Kola-nut Culture in Igboland

In Igboland, the kola-nut or the “Oji” is an important aspect of the people’s norm. The kolanut has been basically identifies as the peace symbol of South- eastern Nigeria. The kola-nut and the tree that produces it belong to the class of elements that strongly impinge on the existential realities and the daily communion of the people. Indeed, the kola-nut is among the foremost icons of culture that exterts tremendous influences on the cosmology of the people.

But it is very difficulty to discuss the kola as an ideology among the Igbo without attempting to investigate its origins. However, this cannot be done precisely because it appears to belong to Igbo pre-history, predating even the founding of many Igbo towns. According to Paul Lovejoy, “Kola first became important in West Africa in the distant past”.¹⁶ The *Oji Igbo* is so distant in origin that it had even established its overriding importance by the time some Igbo communities were founded. Like other rationalizations in Igbo traditional setting, it is claimed that our (Igbo) ancestors went to the orchard of the gods and were asked to pluck any fruit they liked, they chose the kola-nut as the king fruit of all fruits.¹⁷ This merely underscores the place of kola-nut custom in Igbo Society.

Ordinarily, kola-nut (Oji Igbo) is one of several species of nuts found in the West African sub-region. There are two types of kola-nut. One is from *Cola acuminata* tree and the other is from *Cola nitida*. Both types have reddish colours. The oji Igbo, (Igbo kola) is cream/whitish in colour. It falls within the species of *Cola acuminata*. It is said to be native in Nigeria. The Igbo kola is distinct from “Oji Awusa” (Hause kola) or “Gwuro” kola nitida, which has only two cotyledons. In Igbo traditional rituals and ceremonies, the gworo is not a valid matter; only the Igbo kola, kola acuminate is acceptable.¹⁸

Basically, one of the peculiarities of oji Igbo is that it has several lobes, though some kola-nut do not have robes. The robes range from two to seven, or occasionally more. The lobes are classified into male and female. Then too, some type of symbolism is associated with the number of lobes each kola-nut has. A kola -nut without robes is not eaten by pregnant women in Igboland. Also any piece of Oji Igbo(Igbo kola) which has only two lobes is regarded as

abominable, a bad omen by the Igbo people. Such a piece of kola-nut is thrown away. However, it is sometimes eaten, though not usually by elders or titled men. Besides, it is never used to offer any type of sacrifice. A kola-nut with three lobes is regarded in many Igbo communities as a symbol of fecundity. The kola-nut which has four lobes is regarded as the conventional kola, portraying as it is the Igbo native week of four days and as well representing the four market days in every part of Igboland. Also it is most significant as it is most sought after for religious and ritual purposes. Among the Igbo, in any social or even religious gathering, there are certain stages of rites that follow before it is eaten. These rituals as they are performed are not only significant but symbolic.

A kola-nut which has five lobes is a sign of good luck, especially for the person whose function it is to break and share the kola. In many Igbo communities, a situation where a kola-nut piece has five lobes, the sharer automatically gets a share. Indeed, he had to put away the fifth lobe. There is no ascertained significance attached to a kola-nut piece which has six lobes, except that in some Igbo communities, the sixth lobe is thrown away, instead of being eaten. It is believed that the sixth lobe belongs to the spirits¹⁹. Finally, a piece of kola-nut with seven lobes is regarded as the ultimate. It is regarded very highly among the Igbo. Before it is eaten, the oldest man in the village would have to offer some sacrifice to the village deity. Generally, the numbers: “three”, ‘four’, ‘five’ and ‘seven’ have great symbolic significant among the Igbo.

There is hardly any doubt that the Igbo people make a great deal out of the practices, call them ritual or ceremonies, which attend the breaking and sharing of kola-nut among themselves. Call it quarrelling or commensality; the important thing is that the breaking and sharing of kola-nut among the Igbo lead to a lot of heated discussions, agreement and disagreement. Many a times, there is also argument about who is to bless the kola, the choice falling most of the time on the most elderly from the aboriginal vicinity in which the kola has been presented. But sometimes on the oldest title person present in the gathering, especially when a ‘son of the soil’ present at the gathering is very, young. Also in some communities, there is a designate sharer in every gathering. In Arochukwu, Kola-nuts are served in a circular carved receptacle with coating.

Like many other Igbo communities, the owner of the house or head of the community kisses the nuts and passes them on to the nearest kinsman and elder for presentation. At Nsukka, all prayers accompanying the kola-nut are said by an indigene as the people regard it an affront for strangers” to say the prayers in their territory.²⁰ This is not in any way an isolated case. In 1993, “the Asagba of Asaba”, His Royal Highness, Obi (Professor) Chike Edozien walked out on the then Governor of Delta State, Chief Felix Iburu among other high officials of the State Government. The reason for this was that the traditional pattern of kola breaking was not adhered to. Since the kola breaking ritual took place in Asaba land, it was customary expected that someone from Asaba,²¹ would have performed the ritual instead of a stranger. These incidents are paradigmatic of the conflict usually generated in the breaking and sharing of kola-nut among the Igbo.

Women and Kola-nut Culture in Igboland

Similar to masquerade culture, kola-nut practices in traditional Igbo societies are male oriented. However, no known kola sharing practices among the traditional Igbo denied women of the share of kola. Instead, what one witnesses are some ideological insubstantial practices which tended to point to women that the kola is a thing for the men to handle even if the women are to partake in the eating. Some of the practices which seemingly marginalize women include the following. First, a woman is not allowed to present kola direct to a visitor in the presence of a male, even if the male is her small son. Secondly, in disputes regarding the sharing practices of kola-nut, a woman’s opinion was not sought. Thirdly, a woman owned no kola-nut trees, and even when she dared to plant one, she owned it only by proxy; that is where individuals – whether male or female – can own kola-nut trees.²² Fourthly, in some communities, a woman was not allowed to take kola from a common kola dish, instead she was given one. Fifth, the kola tree no matter its variety is not a tree people can climb any how. Women are forbidden from climbing,, plucking or even breaking the kola for any reason. By the same token, they are not allowed to harvest the pods from the tree although ironically; they are allowed to process, preserve and market kola-nut after the pods have been harvested by the men. Amorous activities are not even allowed to take place near kola trees as such acts are said to defile the tree and prevent it from fruiting.²³ Finally, in some extreme cases, a woman did not enjoy the privilege of having even kola-nut shown to her during the process when kola are been shown round for the group members to see etc.

These practices appear discriminatory, but these are merely in place to boast the male ego, since in last analysis, no woman present where the kola is being shared is denied a share merely because she is a woman. After all, women do break the kola-nut when they gather in their usual cultural groupings of Umuada, (a council of women) where no man has a saying.

Christianity and Colonial Influence on Masquerade and Kola-nut Culture

The pre-nineteenth century Christian Missionary endeavours did not result in the establishment of Christianity in eastern Igboland, as was the case in the rest of the West Africa.

However, the enthusiasm was given in special expression in 1841, when the British government sent out the Niger Expedition or the “Civilizing Mission” made up of traders, missionaries and government officials.²⁴ Indeed, the Protestant Missions in Britain set up missionary societies in the closing years of the eighteenth century, notably the Baptist Mission in 1792, the London Missionary Society in 1795 and the Church Missionary in 1799. The Roman Catholics were to follow later with their own societies, namely the Holy Ghost Fathers and White Fathers from France.²⁵

The 1841 expedition was significant for the evolution of Christianity in Igboland. In the long run, it left a legacy of challenge and encouragement, which resulted in the planting of Christianity in Onitsha, thereby making it the northern gateway of Christianization in Igboland. The Church Missionary Society arrived in Onitsha in 1857. The fact was that the Calabar or Southern front which opened in 1846, when the Presbyterians established at Calabar did not extent into Igboland more than forty years later. This was how the missions which arrived in eastern Nigeria after the Presbyterians became the first to plant Christianity in eastern Nigeria. The missions are the Church Mission Society (Anglican) and the Roman Catholics who established themselves in Onitsha in 1857 and 1885 respectively.²⁶ Thus, marking the growth of Christianity in Igbo heartland and beyond.

Nonetheless, as Christianity was making in road in Igboland, Colonial advance into the territory began. The conquest of Igboland was in the main accomplished through warfare. The treaties of “protection” through which British consular agents sought to overthrow the authority and independence of Igboland was largely futile. On both the Southern and

northeastern frontiers, the British perceived a great obstacle to their penetration of Igboland, particularly the Aro. The Aro saw the increasing British incursion a fatal threat to their commercial interest and oracular control of Igboland.²⁷ The Aro like most Igbo communities were opposed to the treaties of protection by the British. However, by 1911, most of the Igboland resistance had been subdued. As large areas of Igboland fell to the British, they set about reorganizing the land and introducing enabling structures and policies for streamlining the colonial administration. Subsequently, British influence penetrated into the territory. The colonial era witnessed increased in western education, particularly primary education. This was essentially pioneered by Christian missionaries.

By and large, Christianity and colonial system impacted great influence on the cultural system of Igboland particularly the masquerade and kola-nut culture. A paradox has been noted in the way Igbo society received modern social change. Of all Nigerian peoples, they are supposed to have changed the most and yet the least.²⁸ Two prominent factors for promoting change in Igbo society, namely the Christian mission and colonial administration worked together to shape the Igbo social institution, particularly the masquerade and kola-nut culture. Christian missionaries in Igboland in general saw masquerade culture as occult practices. Then too, the masquerade displays were seen to be strongly attached to the festivals of the traditional “pagan” religion ritual. Hence the masquerade came to be regarded by the Christians as unacceptable to their members. On the heels of these came a series of conflicts between the Christians and the Masquerade groups in several areas of Igboland.

As a highly valued symbol among Igbo people, the Kola-nut is basic thing in welcoming a visitor, gathering etc. It is a symbol of love and hospitality. Thus, Igbo hospitality, friendship and welcome is encapsulated, defined and given cogent identity and expression in the kola-nut.²⁹ Among the Igbo, a male elder performs the rituals. The exercise must not be conducted by stranger. However with Christianity and westernization, these process sometimes are violated. Indeed, prayers accompanying the kola-nut are sometimes said by a Pastor, in a gathering in contrast to tradition. Also women nowadays do break the Igbo kola when they gather in their cultural groupings or meetings. Then too, a woman did not in some extreme cases, enjoy the privilege of having even the kola shown to her during the process when kola that has been provided for a group is being shown round for the group member to see etc. But at present, they are not only shown, but partake in the sharing. However, in spite of the in --

roads made by Christian religion and western civilization, masquerade and kola-nut culture remains an important aspect of Igboland, tradition.

Continuity and Change

Although Christianity and modernity has made inroad in the masquerade and kola-nut culture of Igbo society, they have not undermine their importance. It is vivid that the appearance of a masquerade everywhere in Igboland attract crowds of both Christians and pagan spectators. Even the distance which women, children and uninitiated are from the masquerade is not rigidly complied. However, they were part of the village fun. In most Igboland, cordiality has reached between Christians and tradition adherents on how to regulate masquerade displays especially on Sundays so as not to obstruct Sunday services by the Christians. This was not the case before.

On kola-nut culture, many modern Igbo people attack the kola-nut institutional practices in Igboland. However, even in cases where many segments of the society see that the kola-nut sharing practices in their community are biased against their own section of the community, there is nothing they can do about it. This is because any change effected in the time hallow and ancestor – sanctional practiced is deemed abominable.

Also, what is fundamental importance is that no woman, slave and under privileged member of the society, by whatsoever means defined was denied a share of kola-nut during communal gatherings. In this instance, kola-nut in spite of societal dynamics represents the democratic ideal of equity and the rule of law. Today women break kola-nut in their gatherings, in contrast to the past when in young make person was invited to perform the exercise.

Many a time, there is argument about who is to pray or bless the kola, the choice falling most of the time on the most elderly person from the aboriginal vicinity in which the kola has been presented. However, the oldest titled person present in the gathering is chosen to break the kola-nut especially when a “son of the soil” present at the gathering is very young.³⁰⁼ Then too, in most gatherings, a pastor or clergy nowadays pray over kola-nut notwithstanding the people’s norms on kola-nut.

The rituals which surround the presentation and breaking of kola-nut among the Igbo people is time bound as well as timeless. Hence of all Igbo social practices, it has remained the most permanently fixed form despite Western influence.

Conclusion

In Igboland, the customs, rules and taboos surrounding the masquerade and kola-nut institutions appears to be similar. Nonetheless, there are certain variations in the display and presentation. In Igboland, there are different terms for masquerade, depending on the dialect of Igbo adopted. But masquerade literally means spirit; the spirit even of the dead now made manifest among the living. There are two types of masquerade, the visible and invisible. The masquerade display in Igboland perform several functions in Igbo village life. Generally, masquerade is recognized as a tradition and cultural heritage. Although it may not remain deaf to the pressures for change in the face of the rapid and wide – ranging changes of modern society, any design to abolish it completely while pretending to uphold an authentic African or Igbo culture cannot be considered realistic.

The sacred fruit known as kola-nut is very symbolic in Igbo culture. It is a symbol of love, hospitality, friendship, peace and unity. Indeed, kola-nut is treated with much reverence, as it gives way for easy reconciliation and harmony. The kola-nut in Igbo culture has been described as “a strange passport and immunity from attack”. It is presented ritualistically to both animate and inanimate objects, spirits and humans. It has various taboos.

However, it is important to recognize the influence of colonial contact and Christian religion on the symbolism of the kola-nut. Although this cultural contact has not in anyway affected the honour and respect accorded the kola-nut, one cannot deny the social change it has evoked. Indeed, rather than praying to the ancestors and *Ala* (Earth goddess), the Christians most of whom form the greater number of the Igbo populace have modified their prayers, praying to Almighty God and ending with Jesus Christ, thus omitting the Earth goddess.

On the whole, both the masquerade and kola-nut culture are important aspect of the people's norms, and therefore, should be recognized. They should be held in very esteem as Igbo traditional cultural heritage.

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