

## **A Semiotic Analysis of Some Selected Igbo Mask Head Gears**

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**Abstract**

The study examines the semiotics of Igbo mask head gears through semiotic perspective that treats masks as icons and indexes of identity. The study employs a qualitative research design and descriptive approach. Oral interview and focus group discussion were employed in data collection. The study was anchored on semiotic theory as espoused by Pierce and Ferdinand de Saussure. The findings of the study reveal that Igbo mask head gears are symbolic in their representation. The signification of the carved figures on Igbo mask head gears are culture specific. They portray Igbo culture, their belief system and philosophy of life. For instance, Okumkpo mask head gears contains bundles of scattered spear grass which signifies feminine gender of the masquerade, small eye that symbolizes camera and the big eye that stands for boldness. The plaited hair style represents the gender of the masquerade as well while the black feather is a symbol of evil and the white feather represents sacredness. The study further reveals that in the head mask gears of Njenje masquerade, the carved skull symbolizes death while the rounded mirrors represent the reflection of life. The eye bra, red line on lips and the black dot represents women's makeup. Ekpe masquerade is another Igbo mask head gear that has a head dress bearing a carved figure of human head which is meant to jolt human beings in the parent society of the masquerade into the realization that the ancestral spirit and guardian of their communities could dispense with dissent, evil, lawlessness or immorality by means of capital punishment. The head mask of Mgbeke masquerade is a symbol of the white race. Egede head mask gears has palm branches or green grass on top of the mask to represent peace and warning for the initiated and uninitiated into the masquerade cult respectively. The skull on this masquerade head piece is a symbol of destruction while the palm front signifies the padlock used in locking its mouth. Furthermore, the findings of the study reveal that the feathers on top of the mask head gear of EzeLugulu is a symbol of sacrifice elders perform to appease the gods while the carved human figure on the head mask is a symbol of priesthood. The red line from eyes down the cheeks, nose and mouth represent punishment and repercussions for violators of communal norms. The sack bag from head down to the shoulder is a

symbol of protection from evil attack. In fact, all the carved images on Igbo mask head gears are symbolic and are also culturally determined.

**Keywords:** Igbo Mask Head Gears, mask, masquerade, semiotics, symbol.

## 1 Introduction

Masks and masquerades, as aspects of cultural heritage, take many forms. African masks and masquerades are still used dating track from pre-historic times to symbolize various aspects of African life and ethnicity. Foster (2010) avers that “African mask is an ancient form of human art, religious worship and ceremonial costume. Scribner (2002), Welmesley, Lockhart (2010) and Ferraton (2011) all agree that African masks take many forms, and are made of carved wood, tree barks, animal horns plant fibers, leather, metal and fabrics often with cultural and traditional significance depicting prestige religious rites and reinforcing cultural norms. These masks according to Grahame (2010) are powerful symbolic items, linking the wearer with his ancestors, animal kingdom and spiritual world. Uzo (1997) observes that, “The term masquerade can refer to a masking performance, a masked performer, or the character embodied by the mask itself”. Masquerade is an important mode of cultural expression for several groups from Nigeria. The purpose of masquerade can be to entertain, to commend achievers, to chastise evil-doers, to bring message of hope, peace or impending disaster, to mourn the dead or to receive a special newborn, or to grace a ceremonial occasion like a festival. To these ends, its elaborately created physical presence evokes appreciation to fear and awe. A good masquerade has admirable human and animal features and is a great dancer. Traditionally, masquerades have the highest level of freedom in a village. In view of their awesomeness, masquerades cannot be unmasked, fought, revealed, and once under the mask, he becomes an embodiment of the spirit and sacred.

In the same vein, Igbo culture (2000) reveals that masquerades (mmonwu) are held in accordance with the community’s native calendars during festivals, annual festivities, burial rites and other social gatherings. The masquerades are geared in colorful robes and masks made of wood or fabric. Some masks appear only at one festival, but the majority appears at many or all. Masquerades are associated with spiritual elements, as according to Igbo belief, they represent images of deities or sometimes even dead relatives. The identity of the masquerade is a well-kept secret and performed exclusively by men. Masquerades in African societies as enunciated by Foster (2010) and Ferraton (2011), provide entertainment, define social roles, communicate religious meanings and inculcate societal values, and depict defense. They are used during harvest seasons, fertility ceremonies, renewal of rituals and for status and funerals.

In most societies like Igbo, only men are allowed to wear masks. Women are not allowed to wear them. Group of men usually members of the community, kingship group, professional organization or club, own mask. Masks are also linked with secret societies. Masks and the masquerade have a shared practice no matter the position or status of the individuals.

Mask is a form of disguise or concealment usually worn over the head or in front of the face to hide the identity of a person and by its own features to establish another being. Mask can also be

seen as a figure of head or face (false head or face) worn on the stage in antiquity to identify the character and project the voice. Mask is beings worn at the carnival or rituals. Mask usually represents supernatural beings, ancestors, and fanciful or imagined features and they can also be portraits. The localization of a particular spirit in a specific mask must be considered a highly significant reason for its existence. In masks for socially significant rituals, the change in identity of the wearer for that mask is vital for if the spirit represented does not reside in the image of the mask, the ritual petitions, supplications and offerings made to it would be ineffectual and meaningless. The mask, therefore, most often functions as a means of contact with various spirit powers thereby protecting the beneficiaries against the unknown forces of the universe by prevailing upon their earthly problems.

A mask is an object normally worn on the face, typically for protection disguise, performance or entertainment. Masks have been used since time immemorial for both ceremonial and practical purposes. They are usually worn on the face, although they may be positioned for effect elsewhere on the wearer's body. They are highly respected, and women are not allowed to enjoy close proximity with them. This is because the Igbo people believe that masquerades are visitors from the spiritual world who are sent to carry out a mission on earth. Onyeneke (1987)notes that masking refers to costume and masquerade or masquerading concern not only the costume but also the religious cultural significance and the plays involved.

Onyeneke (1987) views masquerade as a representative of ritual symbolism. As a ritual symbolism, it is defined as an intermediary between the living and the dead. Libation becomes the channel of communication for the two worlds, that is the world of the dead and the living, and the visitation of masquerades signifies the rapport in the communication. Turner (1967) conceptualizes ritual as a prescribed formal behavior for non-technological occasion indicating beliefs in mystical beings or power. As a representative of an empirical symbol, it is for tourist attraction. Masquerading can also be seen as a show where masks, images, shapes, dance, chants and songs are expressed to enhance tourism. As an illusion, masquerade centers on make-up, that is, costume which stands for art.

African masks should be seen as part of a ceremonial costume. They are used in religions and social events to represent the spirit of ancestors or to control the good and evil forces in the community. They came to life, possessed by their spirit in the performance of the dance, and are enhance by both the music and atmosphere of the occasion some combine human and animal features to unite man with his natural environment. This bond with nature is of great importance to the African and through the ages, masks have always been used to express this relationship.

One of the main characteristics of culture of African people is to use masks in rituals and ceremonies. It is believed that the earliest masks were used in Africa before Paleolithic era they represent spirits of animals or ancestors, mythological heroes, moral values or a form of honouring of a person and a symbolic way. They are made of wood, pottery, textiles, copper, and bronze. Details could be made from animal teeth, hair, bones, horns as well as feathers, sea-shells and even

egg-shells. Maker of the masks has a high rank in the village because it is believed that he has a contact with the spirit world and making mask is a craft passed down in the family.

African masks are most commonly shaped like a human face or muzzle of some animals. Masks are highly stylized because African culture distinguishes between outer look of something and its essence. These masks are made to represent an abstract subject, which explains stylization. Animals are frequent theme of African art of Mask making. They represent the spirit of an animal and one that bears the mask, becomes that animal himself which allows for communication with that animal, for instance to ask animal to keep away from the village. In other words, animal is a symbol of virtue.

The most common animals that are represented with masks are Buffalo, Hyena, Crocodile, and Antelope.

Antelope is one of the most widely used animal masks. It symbolizes agriculture and is worn to enable better crops. Horns represent growth of millet, legs roots of the plants while ears represent the songs the women sing in the harvest time. Masks are sometimes made with details from different animals and then they represent some virtues. For instance, to represent the power, masks are made to have Antelope horns, Crocodile teeth, and fangs of a Warthog. Masks representing values can also be of human shape. Mask representing calmness and patience has half- closed eyes, one having small mouth and eyes representing humility while mask that represent wisdom has a wide bulging forehead. Mask with a large chin represents power and strength.

One of the major themes of African masks is female face made by ideal of feminine beauty. While masks of some tribes have breasts and ornamental scars some other have almond shaped eyes, curved eyelashes, thin chins and ornaments. All this considered as attributes of beauty as female for their respective tribes. Wearing of these female masks is reserved for men in most cases.

Masks that represent ancestors are commonly shaped as a human skull. They are used in various ceremonies as witnesses' dead ancestral protectors from which approval is asked or as subjects to whom ask is worn by a dancer that then becomes bearer of the spirit mask, a sort of a medium between the tribe and a spirit. This trance like state is accomplished with a specific pleasure that is spiritual, intellectual, and sensuous. The mask figures awaken in the audience a sensuous, intellectual and spiritual fulfillment. Aesthetics may be defined loosely to involve beauty, taste, pleasure or what could be described as artistic merit. The Igbo mask figure has aesthetic principles to invoke laughter and intellectual delight. The aesthetic considerations of Igbo mask head gears are based on the expressions in it, the kind which are apt and memorable for all time. It is the expression that retains classical merit for a long time that defines the essence of the mask. According Ojaide (2009) aesthetic has to do with critical evaluation and making selections and judgment from among an abundant array of texts.

## 2.0 Literature Review

This section presents a review of related literature under empirical studies and theoretical framework

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## 2.1 Empirical Studies

Masking tradition has attracted a lot of research in Igbo land and the grounds covered by the researchers range from tracing the origin of masking and the study of it in Igbo land, the explanation of the African concept of the object, the relationship between the mask and the history and creative arts and finally, the exposition of community masking tradition for either documentation or cooperative purposes. Researchers as M.J.C Echeruo (1987), Ossie Enekwe and ChikeAniakor(1978), Ike(2012), Onyeneke (1987), Ome(1994), Ugonna (1985), and Edson (2005) have contributed immensely to research in Igbo masking traditions. Aniakor (1978) discusses the Omabe cult and masking traditions in Nsukka cultural context, Echeruo(1981 carried out a research on the dramatic limits of Igbo rituals, Enekwe (1988) concentrates his research on Igbo myth, ritual drama in Igbo land. Ike (2012 conducts research on unmasking the mask, Ome (1994) studies Igbo masquerades as a vehicle for impediments of social mobilization, Ugonna(1984) treats mmuonwu as a dramatic tradition of Igbo while Edson (2005 studies mask and masking as faces of tradition and belief.

Madu (2015) carried out a research on Igbo Omabe chants as poetries of culture in Lejja town. The study deals with a text rendered in Lejja dialect. The main purpose of the study was to ascertain through language, the poetic qualities of the Igbo Omabe chants. The study was anchored in historical criticism theory, the major finding of the study is that the Omabe chant performance is a jubilant occasion of no observable coercion and that membership of Omabe chant rendition is voluntary and exemplified by each participants willingness serve since full participation entails sumptuous blessings from the deity.

Ani, Nwakaego and Umezinwa (2015 investigated masking tradition and its behavioural function in accounting for stability and order in the West, East, and Central African masks. The finding of the study reveals that there is a preponderance of ancestral consciousness in all the masks studied. Some masks appear most frequently at funerals while other masks are used by sorcerers to call upon primordial ancestors for purposes.

Ozor, Garunyi and Odari (2017) carried out research on Umulumgbe contemporary Odo Masquerade ritual performance. The study sets out to investigate the effects of modernity on the contemporary performance of UmulumgbeOdo masquerade ritual. Specifically, the study interrogates the extent which the performance of the ritual has on the one hand, defied modernity, while on the other, it has also incorporated new symbolism and horizon of meaning. The findings of the study reveal that the contemporary performance of this ritual embodies a lot of elements of modernism which have influenced it both positively and negatively. The modification in the UmulumgbeOdo masquerade ritual performance and its taking over by the youths is a positive indication that the traditional UmulumgbeOdo masquerade ritual will be sustained for the coming generations.

Ganyi and Okpiliya (2013) conduct a study on performance aesthetics and functionalism, the legacy of Atam Masquerade of the Bakor people of Ogoja local Government Area. The study

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examines not just the functional relevance of Bakor Masquerade but also the artistry in its realization. The finding of the study reveals through Atam Masquerade, law and order and indeed socialization an entertainment are ensured in Bakor society holds a revered position as a royal masquerade which makes it feared and esteemed by every member of the community its authority is unparalleled in the history of masquerading in a Bakor and its roles span social and spiritual facets of societal existence.

Nwabueze (1987) studies Igbo Masquerade drama and the origin of theatre: A comparative synthesis. The study reveals that the origin of theatre has tended to concentrate on Western theatre disregarding sometimes completely, non-western theatrical practices. When studies are carried out on world theatre, scholars tend to refer to it as ritual which requires more development before it can be perceived as theatre. Researches carried out on non-western theatre by theatre scholars have, unfortunately, not been given the kind of recognition they deserve, while studies on western theatre have been made to assume a somewhat universal recognition. The study concludes that western theatre and Igbo masquerade drama may have developed in different ways, but they both have a common origin-ancestral worship and the urge to communicate.

## 2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is premised on Semiotic Theory. The subject of semiotics owes a great deal to the pioneering works of the American Philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 – 1914) as well as to the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 – 1913) the Swiss linguist. Semiotics involves the study not what we refer to as “signs” in everyday speech, but of anything which stands for something else, symbols. In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects. Whilst to the linguist Saussure, Semiology is a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life, for the philosopher, Charles Peirce, Semiotics is the formal doctrine of signs which is closely related to logic. For him a sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It is all-inclusive subject dealing with ramification (Sound, Sign, touch, smell and taste) and all context (e.g. dance, politics, media, eating and clothing).

Semiotics is often employed in the analysis of text, although it is far more than just a mode of textual analysis. Here it could be noted that a text can exist in any medium and may be verbal, non-verbal or both, despite the logo centric bias of this destination. A text also, is an assemblage of signs such as words, images, sounds and gestures constructed and interpreted with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and in a particular medium of communication. The distinctiveness of the semiotic model lies in its eclectic range and its focus on patterns rather than on discrete elements of signification. The insights that semiotics assimilation from various related disciplines have made its principles applicable to all aspects of human endeavor.

Semiotics is the theory of science and analysis of signs and sign systems and their meaning specifically those concerned with communication between human beings in different societies and cultures (Wales, 1989). To Semetsky (2007) semiotics is a branch of philosophy where verbal and non-verbal signs were taken to be representations of the time nature of things. Sign is perceived to



be an entity that cannot be understood directly but also connects with mother entity, by virtue of our experience.

The theory of semiotic ensures that everything one performs is a sign and everything one sees connotes signs. The study gives attention on how meanings are created via various diversified components. Semiotics basically focuses on decoding of meanings from significations, interpretation of the significations which eventually leads to the semantic consequences. This theory is relevant to the present study in the sense that it helps to explicate the meaning of various signs and symbols depicted in Igbo mask head gears which is the focus of this study.

### **2.3 Summary of the Reviewed Literature**

The related literature reviews so far indicate that the previous scholars centered their works on the definition, description and functions of masks and masking traditions in Igbo land. None of the reviewed work discussed anything about the semiotics of Igbo mask head gears which is a vital aspect of masking traditions in Igbo land. This is the gap the present study intends to fill.

### **3. Methodology**

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design. In this study oral interview and participant observation constituted the method of data collection. The researchers framed the questions in such a way that the interviewees can easily understand what information is being asked for. The unstructured questionnaire was also used in the study because this form of questionnaire does not provide any response options for the respondents. Only questions relevant to the problem were asked and the respondents supplied their responses in their own words in any manner they deem fit. Also, library work was consulted as it helped to illuminate the broad perspective of Igbo mask head gear. The collected Igbo mask head gears were examined, and the mask head gears were analyzed using semiotics theory.

### **4 Semiotic Analysis of Some Masks as Related to the Masquerade**

This section concerns the semiotic analysis of Igbo mask head gears selected from ElugwuEzike in Enugu State, Nigeria, Afikpo in Ebonyi State and Imo State respectively.

#### **4:1. Masks Representing Okumkpo Masquerade**



As a law enforcement agent, Okumkpo is likened to the Nigeria Police Force designated by the constitution to police the country. Okumkpo is used to satirize the evil of men in the community (land) etc.

### **Distinguishing Features of Okumkpo Mask Head Gear**

The mask's head gear contains the following items:

- a). Bundle of scattered grass(eta) on the head of the mask which signifies feminine gender of the masquerade.
- b). The small eye is a symbol of camera. It is used as the general overseer (onyokometer). The masquerade uses it to see everything that is happening in the community especially the bad ones.
- c). The big eye symbolizes boldness (It fears no one) The big eye shows how bold the masquerade can be on stage regardless of who it wants to talk about and what it wants to talk about. He can say anything without minding who is involved in the act. This masquerade is no respecter of person.
- d). The plaited hairstyle represents the gender of the masquerade.



e).The one ear represents reservoir. He hears only once and whatever that goes in there cannot go out again unless on the day of reckoning. The reason for the one ear is to keep the information collected intact until when it is needed to be made public.

f).The black feather is a symbol of evil while the white feather represents sacredness. It shows the power of the masquerade in destroying evil doers in the community.

g) The star (x) at both cheeks represents her birth mark.

#### 4:2. Mask Representing the Njenje Masquerade

This mask is a mythical figure of a young woman who died long time ago. It is one of the prominent figures in the masked performances by the Afikpo. She is adorned with a complex costume that incorporates a headdress with mirrors, multiple cloths etc.

Distinguishing Features of Njenje Mask Head Gear



a). The carved projection on njenje masquerade head gear represents women and their world of beauty (uwamma)

b) The carved skull curved on top of the head of the mask, symbolizes death.

c) The two rounded mirror represents the reflection of life.

d).The spotted background colour of the head mask represents the unique character of every woman.

e) The feather on the head mask symbolizes secrecy.

f) The eye bra, red line on lips, black dot on forehead represents women's face makeup.

g).Theblack line from eyes down the cheeks shows mood.

The mask has a face and a super structure that stretches from the forehead upwards with a ring at the top. The super structure on top of the face of the mask is suggestive of royalty the masquerade carries in its realm. Visibly prominent on this mask are geometric motifs of various sizes seen on a projection stretching from the bridge of the nose to the textured crown. The motifs are also applied on a part of the super structure suggesting braided hair, eye and ear.

Njenje (walkabout) is the name of a parade that involves virtually an entire village's population. It is the period that women used to remember one of their own who died in farm. To show the family of the woman that died that they really care, so they set aside a day called IRI IKO to go and visits the deceased family and their friends and well-wishers before the men took it from them. It opens the first day of the Dry Season Festival--a time Afikpo say "is our Christmas"--when rich meals, visits and ceremonies prevail. Preparations require men in their twenties to organize into an age grade lead the masquerade and assemble elaborate costumes that often involve loans of cloth and jewelry from sisters, wives, lovers and friends who eagerly await the parade. Secrecy from women and uninitiated boys is strictly enforced throughout the dressing process, which adds to the suspense of the audience, which watches players stroll through the village dressed as unmarried girls, Njenje is an elegantly dressed masquerade. Its costume and the dignified manner in which it carries itself set it apart from other masquerades.

#### **4:3. Mask Representing Okpaa Ekpe**

Ekpe is a masquerade reserved for older men that are initiated into its special cult. This masquerade is noted for its colorful costume, extended head gear and spirited music provided by middle to late adult aged.



The colour design on the costume is very significant it is used to dictate the age grade of the man wearing it.

- a) The red colour represents the Onikara age grade between the ages of 80- 90 years.
- b) The yellow colour represents the Horri age grade between the ages of 91- 100years.
- c) The black colourrepresentst the Rekweri age grade between the age of 101 and above.

All these colours are used to show that they fought tribal wars, conquered and are celebrating it.

### **OkpaaOworoworo Masquerade**

OkpaaOworoworo is one of the most revered masquerades in Afikpo. This masquerade only appears on rare occasions and is always accompanied by several Okpaa masquerades, who serve as assistants to the revered Okpaa Ekpe.

### **Ekpe Masquerade**

On the very summit of its head, is poised delicately an intriguing animal head, with two white horns at the bridge of the nose which resembles that of a rhinoceros. The menacing teeth formation it bears, belong to that of an alligator (abadu) in variance to the definition of the rhino which is herbivorous in nature. The mouth is gapping wide in clear readiness to devour its victim or at least inflict injury if it is sufficiently provoked.

This masquerade most probably exudes dread among the people considering the ferocious nature of its head gear. It seems to be in tuned with a correctional spirit meant to keep in check, the excesses of members of its parent society. Masquerade carries mirrors to draw in and punish evil doers as Ijele masquerade

This Ekpe masquerade has a head dress bearing a carved figure of a human head. This head, which rests entirely on a bundled George wrapper, is fair in complexion and resembles a female teenager. It has a cosmetic appearance as if the owner of the head was prepared for an occasion before it was sent off for some ritual. This is evident in the lip coloration and well-groomed eyebrows. The fate which awaits her is registered in the sadness that reflects on its face. One can surmise that, such a head dress is meant to jolt human beings in the parent society of the masquerade into the realization that, the ancestral spirit and guardian of their communities could dispense with dissent, evil, lawlessness or immorality by means of capital punishment.

This does not remove the aesthetic quality of this masquerade which when examined critically, performs its theatrical roles perfectly. While on stage it dances well, follow the rhythm of the drums properly and strides from one end of the appointed dance arena to the other. At such times of performance, spectators are bound to forget the original purpose of this masquerade and simply just enjoy the entertainment offered them.

### **Ijele Masquerade**

Ijele is divided into upper and lower segment by a python at the centre. It is constructed of colorful fabric on a skeleton of bamboo stick and decorated with figurines and depiction of every aspect of life.

Ijele head piece is designed with such figures arranged in scenes, showing a woman in labour, a man climbing a palm tree to cut palm fruit, a chief accompanied by his musicians, making his annual appearance, among others.

### **4:4. Mbeke Masquerade**





Mbeke masquerade represents the white race, oyibo or mbeke meaning white man in Igbo language. The masquerade represents a wide range of European characters, i.e. colonial officers, missionaries, merchants of the white race,

According to history the mask is named after a British medical officer, Dr. Baikie, who worked among the eastern Igbo during the mid-1800s.

#### **Distinguishing Features of the Mask Head Gear**

- a. The white smooth face symbolizes the white race.
- b. eyes
- c. lips

#### 4:5.Mask representing Egede



Egede masquerade is also used during Njenji festivals known as destroyer, performed by young boys and adults. They are also used in chasing woman. Masquerade play in the village commonly, chased by uninitiated boys but very dangerous and aggressive

#### **Distinguishing Features of the Mask Head Gear**

- a) The palm branches or green grass on top of the mask represent two things.  
(1) I come in peace that is for men who has been initiated into the cult. (2) It shows warning, that is, for women and boys who are not yet initiated into the cut, telling them to stay clear because it could be dangerous.
- b) The skull on the mask represents destruction.
- c) The palm front signifies the padlock used in locking their mouth. It does not talk much. It believes that action speaks louder than voice.



d) The mask colour represents the season

#### 4:6. Mask representing EzeLugulu



EzeLugulu is seen as a prince of the masquerade during Iko festival, he carries himself around because he is untouchable and anyone who hurts him is in trouble.

#### Distinguishing Feature of EzeLugulu

The feathers on top of the mask head gear represent a sacrifice. For this masquerade to come out, the elders must perform some sacrifices to appease the gods.

The carved human figure carried on the head mask represents his priesthood.

The colours, on the figure on top of the head mask, represent royalty.

The feathers round the face mask represent security. This masquerade doesn't go alone.

The red line from eyes down the cheeks, nose and the mouth represent punishment and repercussions (you must pay heavily to appease the gods. Tears must drop down your eyes whenever you caused this masquerade to fall on the ground especially when you are not imitated into the cult.

The sack bag from head down to the shoulder is a symbol of protection from evil attack. Other Igbo mask head gears analyzed includes: Ajulaka.

#### 4:7. Ajulaka Masquerade

Ajulaka masquerade has an ugly marble on its face. It is feared because of its magical powers and aggressiveness. The ugliness indicates that it should be feared unlike some other masquerade. The twisted face indicates an attitude of anger.

Ajulaka mask has a grotesque appearance. It has a protruding forehead, two tubular projections for eyes that perhaps suggest its ability to see deep into the human heart. His tubular eyes, jutting cheekbones, and hinged jaw with audible attachment, present another worldly appearance, thereby reinforcing his role in social control. Individual who recover from the disease during the mask's appearance, are obligated to give thanksgiving feast for the whole town in the presence of the mask.

The mask has a face and a super structure that stretches from the forehead upwards with a ring at the top. The carved super structure on top of the face of the mask is suggestive of royalty the masquerade carries in its realm. Visibly prominent on this mask are geometric motives of various sizes seeing on a projection stretching from the bridge of the nose to the textured hair or crown. The motives are also applied on a part of the super structure suggesting braided hair, eye, and ear.

The Igbo funeral masquerade wears a raffia scarf like a cape that covers its shoulder from its head down to the elbow. The oblong shaped mask has two horns carved from the forehead curving up to a centre nearly touching each other at the top. The eyes are a slit suggestive of eyes that are closed in death to perhaps capture the significance and functions of its presence at funerals.

The head mask of swordfish head dress represented in a skeletal form symbolizes immortality or the spirit of the swordfish. The colors of the head dress are derived from the natural colors of the wood and earth colors of brown, red, with black and white. The meaning of these colors may be for aesthetic reasons.

#### **4:8. Atunpi Masquerade**

The head gear of the masquerade is almost merged with rest of the body. A gold band winds round its head, which is crowned with dozens of menacing horns that shoots out in different directions. This indicates that the masquerade is an animal form, and its being in tuned with many horns signifies that it can fight for people it is meant to serve as a guardian. So being an ancestral spirit, the confidence it evolves in its gait, poise and carriage, can garner courage for the people in times of need. Atunpi masquerade were guardian spirit of the people, serving to maintain law and order, and also guarantee peace and fight for the territorial integrity of their nation states at periods when wars ravaged the regions.

#### **4:9. Adamma**

The facial features are enhanced with glaring white cosmetic paint. This is possibly meant to emphasize its feminine attributions. The mask bears facial scarification on both sides of the cheek. This is further elaborated by the black colour used to paint the lips. The eyes similarly re-echo this black aspect, creating a unified design on his face. The two large blue horns are curved backwards close to its head. On its edges are decorations of a series of dark red triangles. The apparent beauty

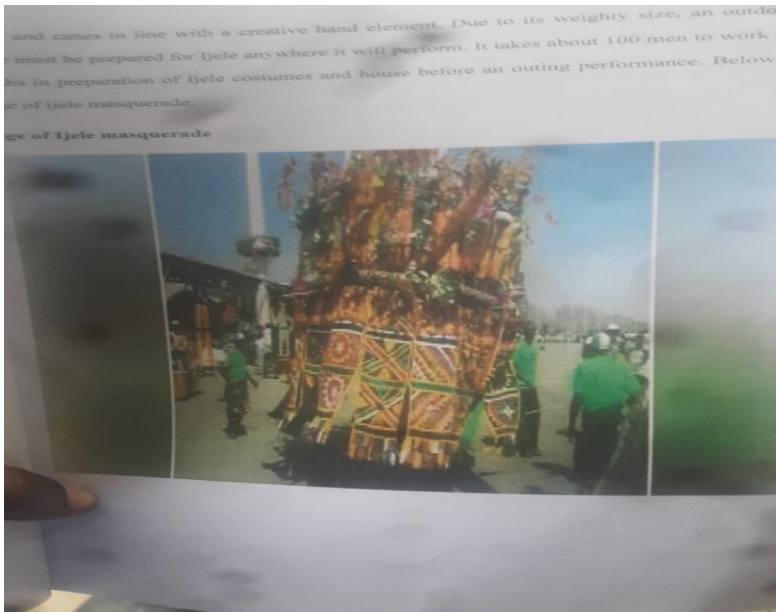
of this mask does not deter it from performing its function. In fact, the feminine aspect is even negligible when the mask dancer, takes on the centre stage. Female spirit, goddesses, queens and heroines are depicted by feminine looking mask quite alright, but it is the male members of the society who dramatize their qualities during festivals.

#### 4:10. Adamma Masquerade



Adamma as much as it foretells the maiden spirit has no spiritual values like most masquerades. Adamma represents the elegance of an Igbo woman and the idea of maidenhood. Adamma's beauty represents the Igbo woman and her beauty.

#### 4:11. Ijele Mask



### **Ijele Masquerade**

Ijele is divided into upper and lower segment by a python at the centre. It is constructed of colorful fabric on a skeleton of bamboo stick and decorated with figurines and depiction of every aspect of life.

Ijele head piece is designed with such figures arranged in scenes, showing a woman in labour, a man climbing a palm tree to cut palm fruit, a chief accompanied by his musicians, making his annual appearance, among others. There are also realistic figures of local animals made of a cloth and stuffed with grass on Ijele masquerade. Also included in Ijele head piece are cocks or fowl perching on the supports as on a compound wall, a man or a woman carrying a baby on his or her shoulder. There is again a wealthy lady showing off her status or well-dressed gentleman displaying his outfit. All these reveal what people find in their local environment.

On the same head piece, one may find domestic portraits blended with figures that recall past political history of the Igbo, for example, a colonial officer strolling with his wife or escorted by a policeman. There are also figures representing the world of spirits to enhance the aura and mystical power of Ijele. There may also be the features of a variety of animal figures such as a leopard about to pounce on its prey such as an antelope. All these are not mere pictures but rather symbolize the historical background and the life of the Igbo people and things that are found among them.

Ijele mirror- this mysterious mirror picks and sees anyone with charm or destructive weapons. This mirror magnets the person to Ijele for punishment. This mirror is reflective and creates an aesthetic beauty.

Ijele python- This is a big snake signifying royalty and mightiness of the Ijele.

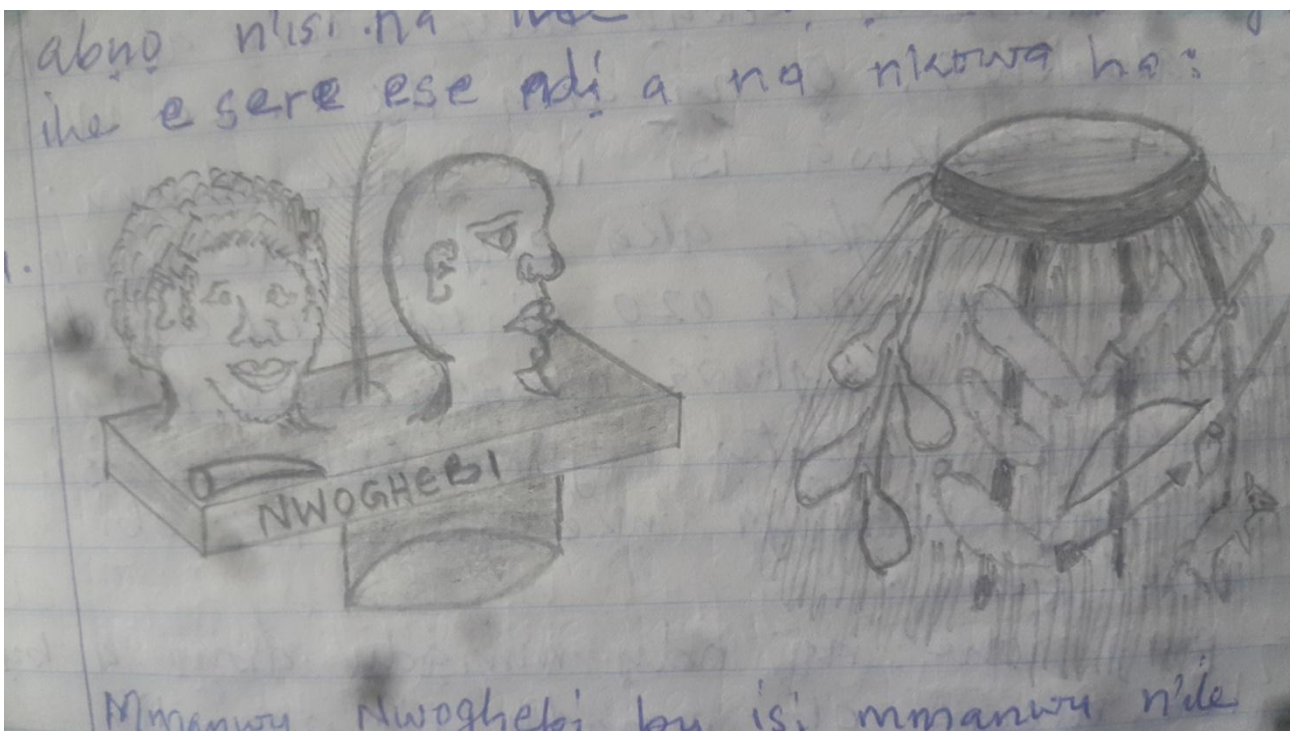
Ijele trees, animals, white man, carved human activities- all these signify wholesomeness of Ijele as every aspect of human life is depicted on Ijele masquerade.

Mermaid object- Ijele is crowned up with mermaid objects signifying Ijele as the greatest of all masquerades.

Ijele horse- The horse represents majesty and greatness.

Ijele masquerade performs at the burial ceremonies of great and powerful kings or special men and women in Igbo land. It also performs at the burial ceremonies of member of the Ijele family or at the death of the oldest man in the community. Ijele mostly performs during the dry season to mark fertility and annual bountiful harvest. It can equally perform at special festivals and occasions.

#### 4:12. Nwoghebi Head Mask



#### 4:13. Nwokeatu Head Mask

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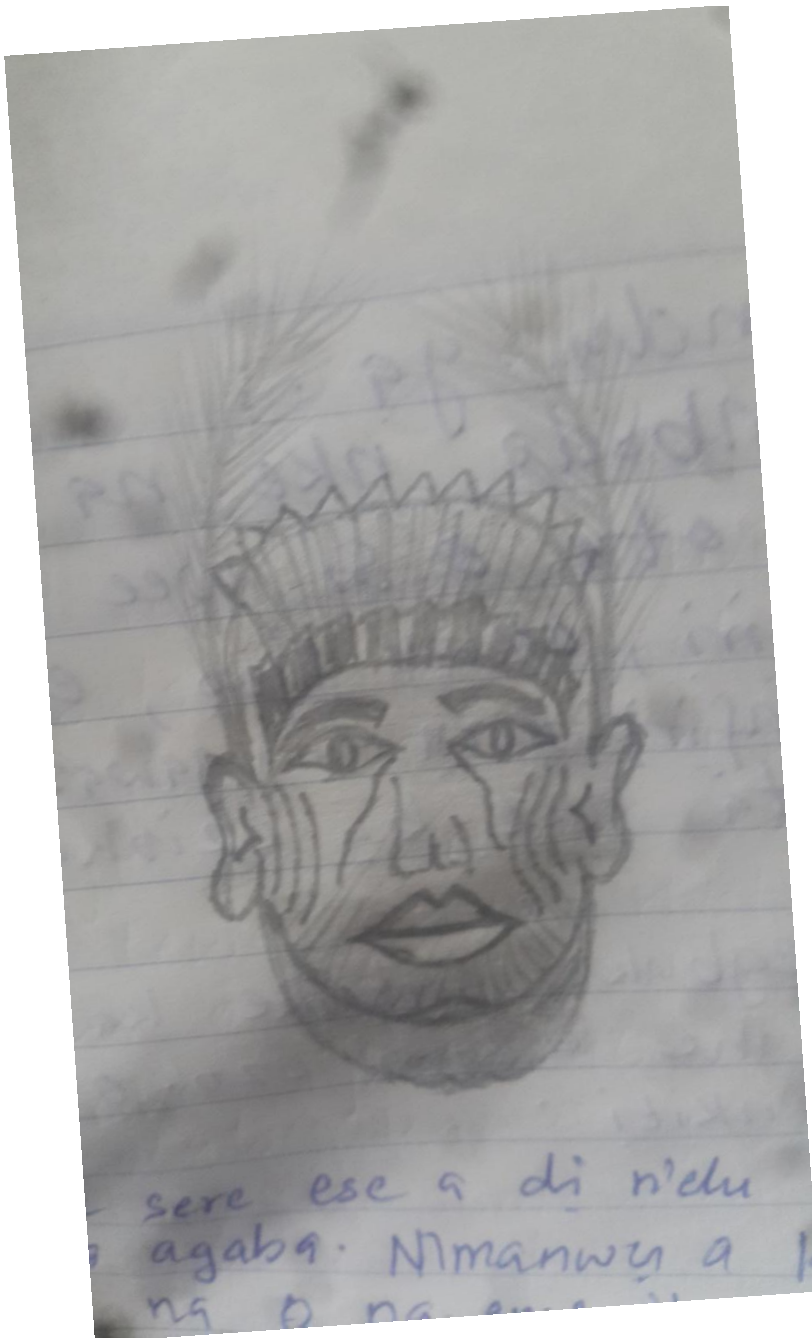


In umu Okoro, Imo state there is a masquerade called Nwoghebi. Nwoghebi is the chief masquerade in this community. It has two carved human heads. The two carved human heads represent the two founding fathers of the community- Nwoghiri and Ebinikpa. Nwoghiri was a well-known farmer while Ebinikpa was a great hunter and two of them lived peacefully. The head mask is made up of carved farm tools and food crops as well as hunting implements such as cassava stem, yam seed, cocoyam with seeds, gun, bow and arrow, dog, matchete, amongst others. All these signify the people's cultural artifacts and depict their occupation.

In between the mouths of these masquerades is a fresh palm frond signifying that this masquerade is not a talk active type but action masquerade. These masquerades believe that action speaks louder than words. There is two white ugo (eagle) feathers thickly affirmed on the two carved human skulls on the head mask. It signifies that peace exists between Nwoghiri and Ebinikpa people.

#### **4:14. AgabaMasquerade**





Agaba is a fearful and ferocious masquerade in umuokoro, Imo state. The head mask contains two ugo (eagle) feathers that signify peace and truthfulness. It has an agape mouth which signifies that it does not waste time to say whatever it wants to say. It mentions the real name of any culprit publicly and how the incident happened. Agaba masquerade is no respecter of person In terms of saying the truth of what is hidden. The wide ears signify that it hears everything such as gossips, bad words, truth, and accusations amongst others. The glistening eyes signify that it sees everything hidden.

Agaba masquerade has elaborate head dress topped by crescent shaped buffalo horns which could be carved. It also has pointed horns of various kinds of antelopes, which are used to convey

the symbol of masculinity in the community, where young men are renowned for killing wild animals in communal hunts. Agaba masquerade head piece is symbolic because it draws an analogy between the physical perfection of wild animals and the strength and vitality of young men of the community. The helmet, surmounted by a cluster of horns and sometimes carved objects, such as knives, spears, paddles and many more, are partly for decoration and partly to characterize the achievements of the young men.

#### **4:15 Mgbedike Mask Head Gear**

The elephant on the head mask represent the spirit while the two arrows symbolizes the power and glory of the spirit represented in the masquerade

Agu-lion symbolizes the power and the spirit behind the masquerade. The agu (leopard) also stands for the strength of the masquerade. Akwa –the different cloth tied on the head is for beautification of the masquerade. Enyo –the different sizes of mirror on the head also shows the beauty of the masquerade.



Some Igbo use large funeral mask that have human and animal features. This helmet has a basketry cap upon which is formed a head of wood and black gum, animal teeth, horns and wooden blade are present. The mask's distorted features, horn, blades, shaggy brown costume and the aggressive dance of the wearer, express male skill and ability

#### **4:16. OpanwaMasquerade**

OpaMma means "carry-child," and it is often referred to as the "queen" mask, "The "queen" has a female face and carries a child on her head. During Okunkpo, she is often hidden in the center of the crowd of seated performers known as a woman who rejects suitor after suitor, she is the center of great attention whenever she gets up to dance. Male performers do their best to be as graceful and delicate as possible in portraying her.

#### **4:17. Mma Ji**

Mma ji means "knife-yam" and refers to the piece, which looks like a knife or machete. Mask is worn by males from young boys to men, who can be costumed as a schoolboy, missionary.

#### **4:19. Awuru Masquerade**

It was historically a means of providing security against crimes such as stealing, poisoning, and killing of persons or crop destruction: if there was a case of such a crime, the masquerade was consulted, and the main suspect was asked to swear to Awuru to prove his innocence. The victim of the crime could ask the masquerades to kill (that is "ilimmonwu") whoever was responsible for the crime.

#### **4:19. Okwe-Ebu**

OkwaEbu is a masquerade that accompanies other masquerades. This masquerade serves as both a mouthpiece for the masquerade it accompanies as well as a praise singer to those watching the masquerade display. The praise singing often results in audience members giving gifts of money or other items of value to Okwa-Ebu and/or the masquerade it accompanies.

#### **4:20. Ota Ikonte Masquerade**

Ota Ikonte is a masquerade known for its clownish appearance and behavior. The masquerade entertains by mimicking the gestures of a drunken person, a clown and other off-beat movements.

#### **4:21. Agboghomonwu**

Agboghomonwu head piece is decorated with ribbons, trills, mirrors and tiny bells that suggest beauty and elegance. The helmet head piece, which covers the head, is crest plaited into lobes to represent the Igbo female hair-do. The style is determined by the status of the female spirits represented. Also represented as style of the helmet-face is the crest surrounded with beautifully knitted short stems which suggests fertility for maidenhood symbolizes the most-ripened and most fertile age of a woman.

### **5 Findings of the Study**

The findings of the study reveal that Igbo mask head gears are symbolic in their representation. The signification of the carved figures on Igbo mask head gears are culture specific. They portray Igbo culture, their belief system and philosophy of life. For instance, Okumkpo mask head gears contains bundles of scattered spear grass which signifies feminine gender of the masquerade, small eye that symbolizes camera and the big eye that stands for boldness. The plaited hair style represents the gender of the masquerade as well while the black feather is a symbol of evil and the white feather represents sacredness.

The study further reveals that in the head mask gears of Njenje masquerade, the carved skull symbolizes death while the rounded mirrors represent the reflection of life. The eye bra, red line on lips and the black dot represents women's makeup. Ekpe masquerade is another Igbo mask head gear that has a head dress bearing a carved figure of human head which is meant to jolt human beings in the parent society of the masquerade into the realization that the ancestral spirit and guardian of their communities could dispense with dissent, evil, lawlessness or immorality by means of capital punishment. The head mask of Mgbeke masquerade is a symbol of the white race.

Egede head mask gears has palm branches or green grass on top of the mask to represent peace and warning for the initiated and uninitiated into the masquerade cult respectively. The skull on this masquerade head piece is a symbol of destruction while the palm front signifies the padlock used in locking its mouth.

Furthermore, the findings of the study reveal that the feathers on top of the mask head gear of EzeLugulu is a symbol of sacrifice elders perform to appease the gods while the carved human figure on the head mask is a symbol of priesthood. The red line from eyes down the cheeks, nose and mouth represent punishment and repercussions for violators of communal norms. The sack bag from head down to the shoulder is a symbol of protection from evil attack. In fact, all the carved images on Igbo mask head gears are symbolic and are also culturally determined.

## 6. Conclusion

From the discussion made in this study, it could be concluded that some Igbo head mask has a face and a super structure that stretches from the forehead upwards with a ring at the top of the mask that suggest royalty the masquerade carries in it realm. The eyes that are slit is suggestive of eyes that are closed in death to perhaps capture the significance and functions of its presence at funerals. The facial features of some masquerades are enhanced with glaring white cosmetic paint to signify its feminine attribution. Female spirit, goddess, queens and heroines are depicted by feminine looking masks.

Every aspect of human life is depicted on Ijele masquerade such as mermaid object which signify that Ijele is the greatest of all masquerade in Igbo land. The horse portrait in the masquerade represents majesty and greatness of the masquerade. Some Igbo masks such as Mgbedike have a basketry cap upon its head on which wood and black gum, animal teeth, horns and wooden blades are present. The mask's features, horns, blades, shaggy brown costume and aggressive dance of the wearer, express male skill and agility.

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