

Poignant Poetics: The Aesthetics of Igbo Mask Chants

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Abstract

The Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria are an ethnic group known for their many and culturally rich traditions. The mask or mm̄nw̄ cult, one of these traditions, is a haloed institution among the Igbo. The masks are regarded as ancestral spirits that visit the land of the living periodically in order to commune, direct and intervene where necessary, in human affairs. These masks play numerous roles of which chanting words and poems of wisdom and entertainment in a sort of dramatic performance could function as either a means to an end or an end in itself. This paper through the context-based pragmatic analysis theoretical framework method examines these chants and finds them laden with aesthetic elements which are functional, entertaining and satisfying as any poetic performance or verse could be.

Introduction: The Igbo

The Igbo are one of the major ethnic groups that make up Nigeria; alongside Hausa and Yoruba. They inhabit the south-eastern part of the country and are bordered by the Igala to the North, Bini and Isoko to the West, and Ibibio, Efik, etc., to the south. Much of the Igbo land lies in the tropical rain forest belt east of the River Niger, while a little lies west of it nearer the Bini people.

The Igbo are known for their mostly patriarchal societies and their uniquely decentralized system of government where the role and post of absolute monarch is more or less non-existent. Their rich culture and traditional heritage also panders towards male dominated affairs where the majority of the most feared, revered, and influential institutions are mostly controlled and operated by men. In families, before the heightened dominance of Christianity, the *of̄of̄* is seen as the symbol of authority on which during communal sacrifices at family shrines, blood of sacrificial animals is spilled. Men carry this *of̄of̄* as family heads and leaders.

The institution of *okpala* as clan leader, existence of *Nzena* *Oz̄o* prestigious societies, age groups (all for males), the all-female *um̄uadas* societies, etc. are all amongst the operative ambits of the Igbo cultural ontology, *omenani*, in order to control, pilot and guide the day to day existence of the Igbo. They are principally institutions of tradition, law and order. But this group of institutions could not

have been complete without including the often dreaded and haloed mask cult: the *mmṛnwu/mmanwu* or *mmṛ* institution.

Masks among the Igbo

The Igbo mask cult is basically male-dominated and operated. There could be vague and isolated cases of female involvement in some obscure part of the Igbo, but that is not the interest of this paper. One of the major functions of the mask tradition and institution is entertainment but it is also well known as a traditional Igbo arm for the maintenance of law and order. Many parts of the Igbo have different names, roles, concepts and projections about and for the mask concept but common denominators such as fear, reverence, and excitement run across the length and breadth of the different parts of the Igbo. This simply means that whether we are accosted by or interested in the northern Igbo *mmṛnwu*, *mmanwu*, *mmṛ* etc., or the Nsukka area *odo*, *omabe*, etc., or the South-West riverine *owu*, *okorsha*, etc., or the *ekpe*, *ekpo*, *ṛkṛnkṛ*, etc., of the Bende and Ngwa areas near the Cross-River region, we are dealing with a sacrosanct and feared ancestral entity of the Igbo (*The Dead Among the Living* 15).

Masks almost always entertain by performing. Their performances are regarded as traditional Igbo theatre. The sight of a masquerade performance is always an interesting and awe-inspiring sight to behold. According to Chike Okoye in his *the Mmṛnwu Theatre: Igbo Poetry of the Spirits*,

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 show-spins, the dance steps and the mainstream chants... are part of the mask's dance drama.(5)

Depending on the variations of a particular Igbo culture area, the mask performance could be solely drama with poetry or narrative playing a supportive and secondary role; or it could be an Igbo area where the poetry or chant takes precedence while the body movement becomes the supportive drama of sorts to actuate poetry in motion. This paper is more interested in the aspect where the mask chants are the central focus of the *mmṛnwu* performance.

For the Igbo of the Awka-Nri-Agulu-Ekwulobia-Arondizuogu axis, the chants or narratives of the mask are the focal points of its performances. The body movements serve to explicate, accentuate and emphasize the narratives. The sacrosanct and haloed reverence with which these parts of Igbo hold the *mmṛnwu* is because it is regarded as, to quote Ugonna's *Mmṛnwu: A Dramatic Tradition of the Igbo*,

(a) A mask with the 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) An age –old form of mask supposed to come to man’s world from the spirit world.(2)

This view imbues the mask with the roles of elder, ancestor, sage, etc., whose wisdom once voiced should be digested and adhered to. According to Okoye, “As an aspect of oral tradition, the mask tradition has within its fold, parts and branches that are storehouses of proverbial literature, unique poetry and idiomatic expressions which have remained incidentally oral...”(6). These make the mask utterances very important for the positive development of the Igbo psyche and polity.

Poetics, Aesthetics, Chants, and Analyses

Poetics broadly concerns the theories of literary forms and literary discourse. But here, we are more interested in Jonathan Culler’s description of poetics in his *LiteraryTheory: A Very Short Introduction* where he says that

Poetics is distinguished from hermeneutics by its focus
not on the meaning of a text, but rather is understanding
of how a text’s different elements come together and
produce certain effects on the reader. (emphasis mine)

Again, *The Encyclopedia of Poetics* lends credence to this strand of poetics:

The aim of *Poetics* (is)...to move audiences... ‘to discover
how a poem, produced by imitation and representing
some aspect of a natural object – its form – in the art-
ificial medium of poetry, may so achieve perfection of
that art form in the medium that the desired aesthetic
effect results.’

As for the ‘aesthetic effect’, Aristotle is obviously aware
of the issue, since the *Poetics* discusses the effects of
tragedy on the emotions of the audience. (934)

Meanwhile, according to M H Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Alexander Baumgarten’s description of aesthetics in his Latin treatise *Aesthetica*, as ‘the aesthetic end is the perfection of sensuous cognition, as such; this is beauty’, lends credence to its modern usage as

designating ‘the systematic study of all fine arts, as well as of the nature of beauty in any object, whether natural or artificial’ (3); and this is germane to our present study of Igbo mask chants.

There are many categories of masks across Igboland. The major functions of these masks vary as a result of the immediate contextual needs of and the original intent of the mask owners - the community. Nevertheless, no matter how macabre, fantastic, bland, repulsive or weird a mask might appear, there is always an element of spectacle bordering more or less on entertainment surrounding its essence and presence.

As was hinted earlier, certain parts of the Igbo prefer masks that are more physically expressive than vocally narrative; while for some parts, dramatic masks count as nothing if they do not indulge in guttural chants of poetic narratives known as the *mbem*. *Mbem* among the Igbo is the general name for chants and poetry. *Mbem mmṛnwu* is used to refer to mask or masquerade chants. *Mbem mmṛnwu* is poetic; and is often in verse. It has all the qualities and features of traditional, oral, Igbo poetry. Summarizing Emeka Nwabueze’s point in his “The Aesthetics of Narrative in Igbo Masquerade Drama”, the *mbem* contains the encrypted form of the Igbo essence, portrayed in rhythmical lines of verse (87). Like all good poetic renditions and forms, the *mbem mmṛnwu* is like the proverbial dry meat that fills the mouth because it takes considerable time to unravel and never fails to awe the audience with lasting revelations of further vistas of meaning.

Poignancy, in addition to its natural and original meaning will assume a contextual profundity when applied to the Igbo chants of the spirits - *mbem*. Because of Igbo ontology, the import of liminal and ancestral invocations, vocalizations and interventions are immensely felt and held in high esteem; even when entertaining. The concept of *dulceetutile* finds a neat fit in the Igbo mask paradigm because as the chants entertain and please the audience, potent words of advice and chastisement also fall into place and get heeded. Surely, to be delighted and reprimanded by the spirits must be a wonderful experience.

The poignancy is more felt when one is an initiate of the mask cult. This is because mask speech and chants often manifest in varying meta-language levels, mostly codified and encrypted for the benefit of a select few (especially initiates) who literally nod in comprehension and appreciation as the mask’s genius and wisdom in the chants unravel.

Chanting masks speak. They speak to people through guttural chants mostly codified but generally intelligible to the majority of the populace. The chants (*mbem*) could be satire, lampoon, praise, self-praise etc (“The Aesthetic of Narrative” 93); and could also adopt boastful, arrogant, challenging, daring, warning, guiding, advising, chastising, etc, tones in the rendition. The chants are rendered in a drawled, sing-song, reedy, unearthly tone accentuated by a pipe-like contraption worn over the mouth. This gives the speech a rasping and unearthly edge and makes it sound more ominously ancestral.

The tonal nature of Igbo language affects the mbem and imbues it with a conspicuous rhythm that is characterized by ‘lines’ marked out by breath-pauses or breath-groups. This understanding is based on the observation that the chanter pauses for breath at the end of a group of utterances. These utterances are the line of Igbo mbem. Interestingly, just as English poetic prosody contains feet within meter, so does the Igbo mask mbem contain *igidi* in the breath-pause. Again, according to Okoye, "...the Igbo experience and apply tone-terracing...a notion that Igbo speech and verse features a gradual downward slope in pitch towards the end of articulation of a line" (118). This means that there is a conspicuously rhythmical diminuendo effect experienced at the last syllables of an mbem line. This contributes to heightening the ominous spirit-ancestor effect.

Sample chants from masks belonging to Agulu and Arondiziogu communities of the Igbo, who are known fairly well as proud and respected practitioners of the masquerade institution, will be represented here and aesthetics highlighted. Odogwuanyammee, Okwuanyịonụ and Akịka-ata-Okwu maskswill be used.

Odogwuanyammee

The Odogwuanyammee name literally translates as “(the) red-eyed brave”. The title suits this Arondizuogu mask because of its exploits that mostly border on derring-do. The mask is believed to be very fetish and steeped in dark magic and charms. It likes to regard itself as invincible. It is a single mask often accompanied by a staff carrying mask side-kick and a human troupe numbering between 8 and 12 who handle the musical instruments. The mask chants solo and where necessary, the human troupe provide choruses and refrains. Odogwuanyammee’s chants are accompanied by melodious and rhythmical music dominated by bass tom-toms. The themes of its chants are often taunting, challenging, sanctimonious, self-righteous, heroic and sometimes ritualistic.

Igbo:

Mgbe m na-eje wee puta n'Ezinano

Obu ekuo mwee nee anya nene Danda

Danda wee gwaba m okwu

Wee sị na ya egbugo ichi n'ihu gbuo n'azu

5 Wee dika dike na-adị ma ọ kwado agha.

Na ọ buile oma ka ejule ji aga n'ogwu

Na a na-eji ego akpa nzu

Were nzu ewunyere ndi nwuru anwu

Na ọ bu ndom ngha ka na-eji ejide agu di ndu

10 Wee kee ya agbụ

Na nnwa m na-atili oyi na-agba okpa n'ogu

-ka m mara kwa a mara

Na o bu o nja ka eji a bu dike n'agha

Ma na ihe na-eku ume na-anwu anwu

15 -ka m kpachara anya

Mgbe ahụ ka m ji nee anya n'ihu nee n'azu

O nweghi onye m fulu

M wee je were igbe eji e je ogu gbanye n'aka ikenga m:

Si onye gbaa n'aka ikenga m

20 O buru ya onwu

Onye gbaa m n'aka ibite

Uwa a diri ya mma!

English:

When I came up to the four-road junction

Discovery dawned, I looked it was Danda

Danda started talking to me

Saying he has scarified his face and his back

5 And that he is now like a battle-ready warrior

A sweet tongue sees the snail through thorns

Money is spent in applying nzu

And nzu is used in burying the dead.

The perfect mist is used in capturing the tiger

10 In order to tie it up

For the kid unprotected against cold kicks the back

-This I should know

For steeling the heart makes a warrior in battle

But every breathing thing is prone to death

15 -That I be careful.

That was when I looked in front and looked behind

I did not see anyone

I then took my war-bracelet and put on my Ikenga-hand:

A foe on my Ikenga-hand

20 Meets his death,

But if one meets my left hand

His world would be better!

The above mbem features aesthetic devices. Line 2 contains alliteration in "Discovery dawned...Danda"; while line 4 contains a symbolic extended synecdoche in "scarified". The process of making ritual or non-ritual cuts especially on the face is known as scarification; and in this context actually symbolizes fetish preparations with charms infused into the cuts. It then becomes both a symbol of magical preparedness and a synecdoche of the art itself. Line 6 is a proverb that has to do with the success potentials of smooth and efficient diplomacy in turbulent situations using the snail's slippery 'tongue' movements that effectively guides it through thorns. Alliterations also appear in the line, "...sweet...sees...snail through thorns". The line, "the perfect mist is used in capturing the tiger" is an aphorism. This probably underscores the importance of poor visibility playing in favour of the ferocious tiger's captors. Another alliteration is in line 11; "...kid...cold kicks". A proverb that emphasizes bravery appears in line 13; while an aphorism on the certainty of death for all living things is present in line 14. An effective caesura balances the effect of the antithesis that separates lines 19 and 20 on one hand, 21 and 22 on the other. above serves for the literary devices in the verse. The next level is one which is context-dependent; which means only locals, and mostly the mask cult initiates can fully grasp the essential meanings behind the chant. The mbem is about the mask's journey for rite and ritual purposes. It is a narrative poem; one in a series that depicts vividly the experiences of the mask on its quest. In the early parts, the mask meets Danda (a type of ant) and in a kind of dramatic monologue, gives Odogwuanyammee pieces of advice. The imagery of meeting a speaking and fetish ant is a metaphysical conception that underlines the mm̄nw̄'s supernatural and mystical dimensions. Interestingly, the Danda persona according to the lines, disappears the way it appeared - without much ado. The mask at

this juncture becomes more prepared and resolves to carry on ready to meet with both friends and foes.

Okwuanyịonụ

This is a mask whose name literarily means that the “mouth-that-will-not-tire-of-speech”. This mmọnwụ from Agulu prides itself to be a social gadfly, a commentator and reservoir of the wisdom of the forefathers. Always alone, with no musical or human accompaniment, it performs its chants either on demand or of its own volition. Its rendition of chants depends heavily on its tonal modulation of the rhythms of Igbo speech uttered in mid-tempo; in a sing-song manner somewhere between a song and slowly measured speech. This mode lends a grave and revered guttural quality to its chants. In varying lengths of independent verse, the mask brings forth vestiges of social commentary, admonitions, observations, advice, satiric pieces, lampoons, and self-praise.

Igbo:

Ụbọchị mụ na ụmụọkpụ nwere ikpe nwa m

Ineke wee chatojuo m anya

A gwalụ m ndị nze na ọzọ wee sị fa oo

Na okwu dị mma nze ataa ọjị

5 Okwu adighi mma na nze ya ata ọjị

Nya kpatara ndị nze ji anwụ ọnwụ ikwu

Ha wee tiesị na okwuanyịonụ e kwuwaa ọnụ

Na e ya-ekie agbụ oo

M kpọ ndị nze na ọzọ ha za m oo

10 M we sị fa, ọ ka mụ na ụmụọkpụ wee

Kpebe ikpe mmọnwụ

Onemgbe ka nke ahụ jiri bido n’ana Agulu?

Ọ bụ n’ana na ọ bụ nsọ

M sị fa na o nwere okwu m m’ekwu oo

15 M kwuchaa okwu, maka na inu ka Igbo ji eri okwu

A na mekwu na ana m ebe o o

Onye ọ bụna marakwa na

Ajadu Adaziana anaghikwanu aṅu nkwu-enu aṅu

Ihe m gwara ndị nzena ọzọ ụbọchị ahụ gboo gboo

20 Ajadu Adaziana anaghikwanu aṅu nkwu-enu aṅu

M sịfa na Ajadu Adaziana were nka nṅọ nkwu-enu aṅu o

Igu a malụ were nka gbajisibe ọnụ

E were ha nka gbara efi ọsọ

M chirị awọrọ nabara onwe m!

English:

The day I had a case with the womenfolk my son

I got confounded with issues

I spoke to the Nze na Ọzọ, telling them

That in peacetimes they eat kola nuts

5 That in troubled times they still eat kolanuts

And that is why they die ignoble deaths

They all shouted that Okwuanyịonụ has spoken the unspeakable

That he should be trussed up.

I called the Nze na Ọzọ and they answered me,

10 I now said: should I drag an mmọnwụ case

With the womenfolk?

When did that trend start in Agulu?

It is an abomination!

I told them I had something to say

15 When I finish...because the Igbo eat speech with proverbs,

I am saying and I am crying out
 That everyone should know that
 The Adaziana widow does not drink up-wine...
 This I told the Nze na Ozo on that day far back in time
 20 That the Adaziana widow does not drink up-wine...
 If the Adaziana widow tactfully drinks up-wine
 Palm fronds will wither in protest!
 They tactfully avoided the irate cow;
 I gathered my scales and left!

The aesthetics of this verse lie in the fact that it is a narrative and didactic anecdote on the all-knowing infallibility of the mm̄nw̄ persona and institution; and in extension, wisdom of the ancestors. It also underscores the strictly non-participatory role of women among the mm̄nw̄mask tradition practitioners of the Igbo. Lines 4 and 5 contain an aphorism that describes the dishonesty and corrupt nature of the prestigious Nze na Ozo society, while lines 10, 11 and 12 feature a rhetorical question that underscores the non-participatory role of women in mm̄nw̄. Line 16's repetition enhances emphasis in the same manner as lines 18 and 20. Line 22 is a metaphor of imagery concerning abomination and revolt while line 23's "irate cow" imagery is a metaphor for the mask and the traditions it represents. "Scales" in line 24 is part metonymy and part synecdoche; the former because it could represent the mask as an entity (a flaking one), or the latter because some parts of it actually look scaly.

Akika-ata-Okwu

Also an Agulu mask, it is similar to the Okwuanyionu. Its name roughly translates to "speech defies termites", which means that speech or the spoken word neither decays nor spoils not to talk of being prone to termite attacks. The effects and potency of the spoken word last almost forever. This mask also praises itself, warns deviants, miscreants and adversaries. It also comments wittily and satirically on social events and occurrences. Like the Okwuanyionu, its verses are largely epigrammatic.

Igbo:

O dika mu gulu obodo
 Mu gulu nwa
 O dika mu gulu nwarobunagu

Anya ọbụla fụlụ ugo

5 Nya jaa kenụ ugo daa

Na anya adi afụ ugo kwadaa

Nkili nkili ka a na-ekili ododo

Sị ejikwene ododo je nie ozu

English:

I have the urge to clutch the people

And clutch the child;

I have the urge to clutch the child-in-the-wild

The eye that sights the eagle

5 Let it hail the eagle always

For the eyes seldom see the eagle

You can only admire velvet

It should not be used as a burial shroud.

The rhythm of the first three lines is unmistakable. The caesura occurring at the end of the first line enhances the enjambment of lines 1 and 2; this also creates the balanced pause that spreads into the free sprung rhythm of line 3. The repetition of “clutch” in identical places in the three lines forms a medial rhyme, while the assonance of “child” in 2 and “child-in-the-wild” in 3 is musical.

Lines 3’s “child-in the-wild” is a descriptive personification for a spirit deity that is often situated in the wild where it prefers to inhabit. Lines 4, 5 and 6 contain a proverb that emphasizes the importance of making use of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, while 7 and 8 constitute an aphorism that advises on the suitability of objects or things for specific purposes.

Conclusion

It is important to note here that after all said and done, a dry, abstract and paper document such as this will never come near in semblance to the real poetry-in-motion that themmọnwụ mask chant performance is. It is traditional African Igbo theatre where the ‘script’, audience, and setting are always dynamic; ever-changing in order to suit particular exigencies. Again, the descriptions of the performances, the reactions and participation of the audience, and the general atmosphere of the performance in a natural setting is better experienced first-hand than through any other means. Nevertheless, this paper has attempted to show that Igbo mbem mmọnwụ chants contain aesthetic

elements that are interwoven into the kernel of traditional Igbo lore and norms that are important to the Igbo society and relevant even beyond. This position is nevertheless in cognizance of the fact that the translations available on paper remain so; for want of a more apt medium in order to tackle the problems of loss of untranslatable indigenous expressions and nuances.\

The Igbo mm̄nwu institution is a rich storehouse of traditional lore, customs, wisdom, etc.; and through the mbem chant of certain categories of masks, this orature of the ancients aesthetically adorned is continually re-enacted and re-adjusted to entertain, guide, and teach for the betterment of the society.

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