

The Metaphysics and Social Philosophy of *Iti MmỌnwụ/Mmanwụ* in Igbo Religious Culture

Chika J.B. Gabriel Okpalike

&

Jubilant O. Okwota

*Department of Religion and Human Relations,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka*

Abstract

This study explored the ontological foundations and the social connections of MmỌnwụ/Mmanwụ in Igbo cosmology. It derived from an ethnomethodological study of MmỌnwụ/Mmanwụ and Iti MmỌnwụ/Mmanwụ among the Igbo. The revival of traditional religious practices by the younger generation of the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria has evolved renewed interest in the various dimensions of that culture. There are existing studies in these dimensions but they are mostly done to align with western stereotypes and paradigms. Most times, these studies are descriptive and gleaned from the periphery of the object of study. Phenomenon like MmỌnwụ/Mmanwụ belong to areas which the more dominant Christian culture among the Igbo views with suspicion or which has been meted with outright condemnation. Therefore, researchers who are at the same time Christians neither go into the nitty-gritties of the phenomenon so as not to be found guilty of meddling with it nor present it in a positive light so as not to be found guilty of heresy. The present researcher is a practitioner and initiate into the MmỌnwụ/Mmanwụ circle in his community. This research is an insider's perspective of the practice. The research collected most data from participant observation and previous studies by researchers on the subject matter. It did a critical analysis of data utilizing tools of Igbo metaphysics, mysticism and social philosophy.

Keywords: *MmỌnwụ, Mmanwụ, Masquerade, Masquerading, Igbo culture, Igbo philosophy, African Religion, African Philosophy, Igbo Metaphysics*

Introduction

Among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria, there has been a sustained revival of ancient cultural practices in the fields of religion, medicine and culture in society for over half a decade. One of the aspects of Igbo religious culture which is currently experiencing this wave of revival is *Iti MmỌnwụ/Mmanwụ*. Unlike in olden times when *Iti MmỌnwụ/Mmanwụ* was

scheduled as an integral part of the communities' agrarian calendar and organized to fit into the socio-religious life of the people; albeit serve its original purpose for the community, it has become an unscheduled activity; sometimes interrupting the social and economic activities in their local communities. Uwaegbute (2021) reported his research in the Nsukka area of Igbo land on the revival of the *Omabe* and *Ọta Ọkpa* where he found that young people were merely interested in reviving this tradition, understanding it as *au courant* with the ongoing inculturation, especially in the Catholic Church since the 1960's. They also understand it as undoing the harm already done by Christianity in denigrating the tradition and culture of their ancestors.

This revival has been understood by many as neo-paganism. Isenjia (2023) reporting the concerns of Catholic Bishops of Nigeria, Owerri Ecclesiastical Province, rising from a meeting August 9, 2023, quoted them verbatim: "We are alarmed at the rate at which our young people are relapsing into neo-paganism". Aneke (2021) did not just refer to this phenomenon as neo-paganism, he also understood the participation of Christians in reviving these practices as presenting Christianity in a bad light. Even with a very informed exposé he made about the origin of the pagan concept and use, it is baffling why Aneke still perceives what is going on among the Igbo as neo-paganism. This research is filling in the gap for intellectuals like Aneke to connect the dots of their disconnect with the Igbo religious culture. At another level, Anizoba and Aande (2021) went the way of syncretism which is the other way scholars analyze this phenomenon. Again, this researcher delves into *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* and *Iti Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* from an insider's perspective to offer the *raison d'être* of it and the significance of its activities among the Igbo.

On another level, the revivalists also seek spiritual connection to their ancestors; a connection which they understand as having been deeply severed by Christianity which had 'evaded' and 'dominated' Igbo land. The younger folks who engage in this revival are sponsored by individuals who deem it fit and their bounden duty to align themselves with their ancestors to continue what they have come to understand as dying legacy. These sponsors go as far as promising the young folks 'better lives' which includes funding their education or start-ups (for those who are beginner entrepreneurs). Sponsorship of *Iti Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* activities had been the norm in many Igbo communities (Reed, 2005), but the whole purpose of it and the pattern of *Iti Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* activities have changed.

The present researchers understood that these manners of analysing and interpreting the revivalists' activities are detrimental to the Igbo. In the first place, the revivalists do not have a good knowledge of the ontological foundations of *Iti Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu*, but are sentimentally connected to it. Secondly, this revival is often weaponized against the

Christian religion which they paint as the enemy whose scheme is to efface their ancestral legacy. The present research therefore aimed at delving into deeper insights about *Iti MmṖnwu/Mmanwu*, by exploring the ontological foundations, cosmological idea and socio-cultural significance.

Iti MmṖnwu/Mmanwu is common among the Igbo (Ele, 2022:92); this is also true about many African traditional cultures. It is an ancient practice among the Igbo which has been poorly translated as masquerading. *Iti MmṖnwu/Mmanwu* in Igbo land has assumed a new and interesting dimension, especially in the southern part of Anambra State, which has become worrisome to Christian religious leaders and community leaders who are Christians; *Iti MmṖnwu/Mmanwu* is ordinarily translated as ‘Masquerading’, while *MmṖnwu/Mmanwu* is ‘Masquerade’. This work engages with *Iti MmṖnwu/Mmanwu* as a cultural expression in the Igbo religious universe and delved into its ontological foundations. Its aim is to offer a more robust and integral perspective in the study of *MmṖnwu/Mmanwu* which will benefit the culture and help it transit into the Christian culture which has taken over Igbo land without demonizing it and help revivalist to avoid weaponizing *Iti MmṖnwu/Mmanwu* to harm Christianity which it wrongly perceives as enemy. The work collected data from participant observation and existing literatures; it did a qualitative analysis of data using ethnomethodology.

Spirits in Igbo Religious Culture

To understand *MmṖnwu/Mmanwu*, in Igbo religious culture, it is important to do an exercise in the nature of spirits among the Igbo. This is because *MmṖnwu/Mmanwu* is associated with spirits. It is, therefore, impossible to understand *MmṖnwu/Mmanwu* and its operations within the dynamics of Igbo religious culture without a good knowledge of spirits, their levels in the Igbo spirit hierarchy, their characters and characterizations and the spiritual domain to which these spirits belong. In a mystical sense, the Igbo universe can be divided into four domains – *Aka*, *Chi*, *Anwu*, and *Azi*. Writing on Igbo traditional calendar and basic cosmic cycles, Umeh (1999) referred to *Uga*. He understood *Uga* as “major waves of incarnate Spirits and re-incarnating ancestors of Ikuku Chukwu (the winds of God).” (p. 23). In application, he meant successive ages of human evolution. At the same time with *Uga* he alluded to the spiritual journey of the individual and being born into the human sphere. For instance, he remarked that once the child’s head surfaces at the birth canal during delivery, the Igbo refers to it as *Itinye Isi n’Uke na Uga*. By this he insinuated that on their way coming into existence, human beings traverse these four regions of the spirit (being born is often referred to as *Ibịa Uwa* – coming into the world). But that is only one way of understanding *Itinye Isi n’Uke na Uga*. More than Umeh’s interpretation, *Itinye Isi*

n'Uke na Uga means launching into *Uke* and *Uga*. In other words, the child is being born into the mortal engagement with *Ukena Uga*. While *Uke* represents forces, energies or spirits which hinder human progress in the universe, *Uga* represents forces, energies and spirits of progressive trajectory through the universe. By progress and trajectory are meant the entire involvement with life from birth to death which the Igbo believe is always subject to the influence of the spirits. *Uke na Uga* is the Igbo version of Chinese *Ying* and *Yang*. The interaction of *Uke na Uga* constitutes *Ijeuwa* (life's journey) which everyone experiences in the company of *Chi*. According to Achebe (1986): "Man journeys from the land of the spirits to the land of the living where he takes on physical form." (p. 16-17). In her study of *Ogbanje*, often referred to as Repeaters (people especially children who come to life, die young and keep repeating the cycle of birth and death for whatever reason), she found that the journey to the world is "negotiated across a river". She also referred to two routes to the physical world from the spirit world: "There are two routes to the world of the living. These routes traverse the nebulous boundary between the world of the living and spirits." (p. 17). Probably Achebe was referring to *Anwu* and *Chi*. She identified the two inhibiting forces on this journey, *Onabuluwa* and *Nnemiri*. The other is *Ndimpuruchiwa*, though she did not mention it. Igbo basic dualities are launched at *Chi*, there the interactions among and conflicts between entities, oppositions and rivalries are consequent upon these dualities. Meanwhile, Umeh (1999) went ahead to explore *Uga* as successive ages through *Aka*, *Chi*, *Anwu*, and *Azi*. Whereas his discussions of *Uga* unveiled more to this writer about the hierarchies of spiritual operations in the Igbo universe, it is also important to explore his application of these different levels in the discussion of *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu*. *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu*, is one of the forms of expression of spirits in Igbo mystical universe. More than past, present and future ages as impressed by Umeh, *Aka*, *Chi*, *Anwu*, and *Azi* represents spiritual domains or levels in descending order, *Aka* being the highest level. Notably, the insight of Umeh shed enough light on the nature of the spirits which operates each of the domains.

Human life is spent with constant efforts to access these forces or powers, domains or states of being as means of aiding one's life journey. *Aka* is the first-tier domain peopled by immortal and eternal spirits collectively referred to as *Umuaka*. *Aka* is the level of individuated spirits which exist and function in a monolithic sense; they are not individualized. It is another way of saying that the Supreme Spirit of the Igbo universe is a head with a community of members. *Aka* is inaccessible in as much as the Igbo does not give up in the attempt to penetrate it even when accessing it have ever proved abortive (Umeh, 1999:25). They attempt penetrating that domain through *Ichuaja Eze Elu*, for instance, which is often performed once in a while. This is sacrifice offered to the king of the skies or God, variously named in different cultural areas. Metuh (1999) made a case to

the contrary, stating that “Our data on this topic suggests that many Igbo groups make sacrifices direct to Chukwu. Such sacrifices are not as rare as is often suggested.” (p. 158). He went ahead to cite *Ime Chukwu* or *Igba Mkpu Chukwu*, *Aja Eze Enu*, *Iruma Chukwu* and *Ikpa Ugbọ Chukwu* as instances. Yet it does seem that Metuh considered sacrifices done via other media spirits as direct. However, it may be viewed, Chukwu, for the Igbo, is the “wholly other” with whom humans had scanty dealings. His domain is a monolithic domain also understood as the abode of Chukwu and other pure spirits which the Igbo cannot represent either as *Arusi* or *Mmonwu*. Umeh’s perception of these four domains as epochal or periodical also led him to understand *Mmonwu* as dramatization of the past: “Igbos have also dramatized the four Igbo ages of the world with masquerades” (p. 26). Subsequently, he mentioned *Awolo be Igweor Oganigwemasquerade* as a dramatization of *Uga Aka*. However, it is important to note that in Igbo cosmology, the domain of *Aka* is beyond *Igwe* (the Sky). Care must be taken not to limit the reach of the Igbo spiritual extension with *Igwe*; *Igwe* itself is below Chukwu’s domain of operation, it is male and its female counterpart is *Ala*. *Aka* is not characterized by gender. Chukwu is not governed by Igbo basic duality; even when Chukwu is referred to as ‘He’, it is for the convenience of custom and speech; sometimes it could also be “She”. In any case, using the analogy of *Mmonwu/Mmanwu*, Chukwu, as the spiritual head of *Aka* is *Mmonwu/Mmanwu ka Mmonwu/Mmanwu* or *Mmuo ka Mmuo* (the greatest of the greatest spirits).

By nature, Chukwu is genderless; the Igbo is deeply conscious of that, no wonder some spirit manifestations are feminine especially water and fertility spirits. *Igwe* is *Arusi*, Chukwu is not. *Igwekala* of *Umunneoha* is an instance of the localization of *Igwe* as *Arusi*. Nevertheless, this *Igwe* is the Sky or Cloud whose enveloping and encapsulating nature overwhelmed the Igbo that they deify it (Ifesieh, 1980:27). Chukwu of *Arochukwu* is not a localization of Chukwu; it is the bastardization of Chukwu by a people who will stop at nothing to promote their trade. Otherwise, that deity was originally *Ibini Ukpabi*. It was Chukwu who caused manifestations of this domain as *Igwe* and *Ala* which are also *Arusi* in their own right. Since they are directly caused by Chukwu, *Igwe* and *Ala* are superlative degrees of *Arusi*. Therefore, Umeh’s *Awolo be Igwe* or *Oganigwe* masquerade is not the dramatization of *Aka* as he claimed; they are the manifestations of spirits originating from the domain of *Anwu*.

Chi is the second-tier domain, peopled by *Chi* or *Umuchi*. *Umuchi* are community of pure spirits, ambivalent in nature, even in their individualization. They also include other spiritual entities like *Eke*, *Orie*, *Afo* and *Nkwo*; *Ifejioku*, *Umuoku*, *Aro* and so on. These spiritual entities are ordinarily categorized as *Arusi*, having shrines all over Igbo land. This is because this domain is accessible to humans; and because their shrines are found, many of which were erected and established in immemorial times, the Igbo tend to believe them

to have been originated by *Ndi Mbụ na Ndi Egede* or *Ndi Aka na Ndi Ushi* (these are unidentified personages who belong to the remote Igbo past beyond living memory) (Onwuejeogwu, 1997:8). In this domain also is *Chi*. *Chi* is the generic nomenclature of the spirits operating this domain, but in identity, they are each the spiritual other of the human population in the Igbo universe. Igbo ontological duality is founded in this domain which also introduced conflict and opposites. *Chi Ojọọ* and *Chi Oma* are the primordial manifestations of these dualities, conflicts and opposites. *Chi* is the principle of *Ịlọ Ụwa*. It is actually *Chi* which is the essence of *Ịlọ Ụwa*, often referred to as Reincarnation, albeit wrongfully. When the same *Chi* is providentially assigned to one, which had earlier been assigned to someone else who had lived and died, the former is seen as the *Ịlọ Ụwa* of the latter. But this is the extent to which the phenomenon of Ilo Uwa is known on the streets of Igbo world where it is thought and taught that Ilo Uwa means that a new born child is the reincarnation of a relative who had earlier passed on. On further inquiry and deeper insight, one may stumble into the natural laws of *Onye na-alọ ụwa na chi ya* (every individual comes into existence via personal *Chi*), *Ofu nna na-amụ, mana ofu Chi anaghị eke* (Same mother may birth a number of individuals, but each embodies a different *Chi*), *Mgbe gaa chi lọrọ uwa alogharịa* (from age to age, same *Chi* comes again) and so forth.

This is precisely what the Igbo mean by “*Ofu Chi lọrọ ha ụwa*” (One *Chi* is incarnate in both) when comparing two persons’ character, behaviour or personality. Often *Ịlọ Ụwa* is transliterated as Reincarnation. That was the case which Onyewuenyi (1996) engaged with and concluded that Africans do not believe in Reincarnation. It is, therefore, not fitting to translate *Ịlọ Ụwa* as Reincarnation. He went ahead to suggest alternatives: “Instead of saying that a new-born child is a “reincarnate” of an ancestor, we should rather say that he is the “vital influence” or the “life-share” or “personal ray” or “living perpetuation” of the ancestor” (p. 44). Ekwunife (2000) was more at the phenomenon and its acceptability within Christian theology, but dwelt more on the nature of it as physical, mystical and psychic. What both of them did not connect was the role of *Chi* in the phenomenon of *Ịlọ Ụwa*; a discourse that is outside the scope of this work. Meanwhile *Ịlọ Chi* is a popular ritual among the Igbo. It is the ritualization of the return of *Chi* in terms of welcoming it in a person’s life or causing it to manifest without let in a person’s life. *Iruba Chi* or *Iruma Chi* is a known practice among the Igbo. It is the Installation or Re-energization of *Chi* or Commemoration of any. *Chi* is typically installed with *Ogbu* (Hedge Fig plant - *Ficus ottoniifolia* or *Ficus exasperata*), *Oha* (*Pterocarpus mildbraedii*), *Akpụ* (Silk cotton tree – *Ceiba pentandra*), *Ogirisi* (*Newbouldia laevis*), *Ngwu* (*Albizia Adcantifolio*) etc. Notably, some of these plants are gender sensitive, sometimes growing into powerful deities. With *Chi*, every Igbo needs to be sure that he/she is in good standing. This can be achieved through morally acceptable

actions, community service and ritual sacrifices. When good relationship with *Chi* is assured, one's life runs without much ado.

The spirits of this domain can be represented as *Arusi*, and can manifest as *Mm̄onwu/Mmanwu*, though in rare occurrences. The mystical knowledge of operating the domain of *Chi* for *Mm̄onwu/Mmanwu* manifestation is not given to everyone, conjuring spirits from this domain obviously takes more rigorous mystical involvement which could sometimes be dicey, precarious and dangerous. A typical *Mm̄onwu/Mmanwu* manifestation of *Chi* is *Qganachi*. *Qganachi* as *Mm̄onwu/Mmanwu* manifestation is a comprehensive ritualization of life as community/family-oriented, its challenges, vicissitudes, vagaries, enjoyment, contentment etc. *Chiebenuzo* is another *Mm̄onwu/Mmanwu* manifestation from the domain of *Chi*. It ritualizes the moral failures of denizens, the watchful eyes of *Chi* and the entertainment of the spirits via human actions. These two *Mm̄onwu/Mmanwu* manifestations can be found in Akpo, Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State.

Anwu is the third-tier domain of spirits. *Anwu* is the most frequently penetrable spiritual domain; it is the domain of *Agwu*, *Ar̄obi n'Aḡu* and other *Um̄uanwu* spirits like *Ogwugwu*, *Udo*, *Ngene*, *Ofufe*, *Ekwensu*, *Ikenga* etc. These spirits are primarily the occupants of this domain. There is no comprehensive list of them, but the Igbo were able to cause the manifestation of a good number of them in their environment. This is also the domain of disembodied spirits of the ancestors referred to as *Nd̄i Nnanna anyi ha* or *Nd̄i Ichie/Ochie* (immediate ancestor). This domain is easily accessible and often ritualized because it is the nearest to the experiential or material universe. The Igbo mastered the religious practice of conjuring and localizing these spirits known among them by the generic name of *Arusi* or *Mmuo/Maa*. Most of the spirits needed by humans for their day to day operation of the universe belong to this domain. *Anwu* is located somewhere on the peripheries of *Igwe* (or *Urukpu*) and the sun is *Anwu*'s eye; it is referred to as *Anyanwu*. The Igbo, most times, engage with this domain that it appears lost on them that there exist other domains higher than it. *Mm̄onwu/Mmanwu*, in a generic sense, also derives from this domain.

Azi is the fourth-tier domain of spirits. The domain of *Azi* is peopled by *Um̄uazi*. Umeh (1999) understood *Uga Azi* as this present age (p. 26). His description of *Uga Azi* was so emotional that he almost gave away the essence of *Azi* which is creativity, resilience, virility, vivacity etc, always there to be seen in the average Igbo; the people of *Azi* do not know impossibility. It takes the spirits in the other domains, especially the domain of *Um̄uanwu* (ancestral spirits) to check the excesses of *Um̄uazi* even as they, in turn, stop at nothing engaging and containing those spirits to their advantage. Perhaps it is important to discuss the usage of *Um̄uaka* and *Um̄uazi* in Igbo religious culture; the essential meaning of which has been lost to the present generation. In every day Igbo, *Um̄uaka* and *Um̄uazi* refer to children, but they do not refer to children in the same sense.

While *Umụaka* refers to children as the materialization of *Aka* (the Igbo sense of humans as made in the image of God), *Umuzi* refers to children as the very portrayal or characterization of the spirits of *Azi* domain. Here we have, *Akalogheli*, *Ogbunuke*, *Ogbanje*, *Akpaaghasa* etc. There are other numberless avaricious and capricious spirits which operate this sphere. Remarkably, human beings are the kings and queens of this domain. Yet their good control of the sphere is predicated upon their connection to the higher spiritual domains, otherwise they will be overwhelmed by the obstructive and contrarious activities of the spirits operating this domain. Therefore, the Igbo involve themselves with the arts of conjuration, invocation, veneration, reverence and dedication more than worship. This is the domain of *Arusi* and *Mm̀ǹwụ/Mmanwụ/Maa* where the ritualization of the other domains takes place. Here the Igbo exercise very deep and interesting religious creativity.

The Metaphysics and Mysticism of Mm̀ǹwụ/Mmanwụ

The present researcher believes that words in Igbo are self-revealing and self-explanatory. Therefore, the Igbo cannot express being except they express its essence. Exploring the meaning of words in Igbo necessarily exposes their etymological, cosmological and ontological foundations. This exercise is entirely based on this conviction and the writer's participation in and observation of the Igbo religious culture. Here also, the writer gleans from the earlier discussions about spirits and spiritual domains in the Igbo universe. The aim of the current exercise is to explore the metaphysics and mysticism of *Mm̀ǹwụ/Mmanwụ* among the Igbo as a means of enhancing the dialogue between the Igbo ancient culture and the contemporary pervading Christian and western culture. In this exercise there are two words to be explored – *Mm̀ǹwụ* and *Mmanwụ* – both of which are used to express the same reality in different Igbo cultural areas. There is yet a third word – *Mmụọ* also rendered *Maa* in some part of northern Igbo, referring to the same reality. It has already been said earlier that in a generic sense, *Mm̀ǹwụ/Mmanwụ* derives from the spiritual domain of *Anwụ*, in a sense that most of the spirit forms referred to as *Mm̀ǹwụ/Mmanwụ* in Igbo religious culture operate that spiritual domain. On the one hand, either of the two words, *Mm̀ǹwụ* and *Mmanwụ*, is a compound word made up of any of these two words *Mma* and *Qnwụ* or *Mmụọ* and *Qnwụ* or *Mmụọ* and *Anwụ* or *Mma* and *Anwụ*. We think so because in Igbo language, when two vowels come together in a word, we have what is called *Olilo Udaume* or vowel assimilation (Emenanjo, 1991:26). There are four words here which each give an insight into the essence of *Mm̀ǹwụ/Mmanwụ* among the Igbo. *Mma* is Beauty (in its essence, beyond aesthetics), *Mmụọ* is Spirit (in a generic sense), *Anwụ* is Spirit (in a particular sense, relating to the spiritual domain of *Anwụ*) and *Qnwụ* is Death (cessation of corporeal existence).

If *Mm̀onwu/Mmanwu* is made up of *Mma* and *Onwu*, then *Mm̀onwu/Mmanwu* refers to the ‘Beauty of Death’. In the first place how can the Igbo conceive beauty in death? Umeh (1997:4) had referred to death among the Igbo as *Odachi*. *Odachi* is calamitous, obstructive; a hindrance to the normal flow of life. Sometimes the Igbo consider death as *Arụ* (Taboo). Perhaps it was this conviction which lay at the background of Onebunne’s position on the meaning of *Mm̀onwu/Mmanwu*. According to Onebunne (2019):

Mmanwu has the same etymological root with mmadu (man) in mma(beauty). Like the concept of mmandu which is mma di, beauty there is, Mmanwu as a compound word comprises of mma and nwu literally meaning beauty and death. Conceptually, Mmanwu is a beauty that is dead (p. 22).

This position is both curious and misleading. He referred to the phenomenon as “the greatest conspiracies of truth of fact unanimously believed to be something and respected.” *Mm̀onwu/Mmanwu* is neither conspiracy nor deceit, it is a belief system. *Mm̀onwu/Mmanwu* is not dead, it is alive; it is better described as life after death. Succinctly put by Kanu (2014): “Thus masquerades are not the dead forefathers but visible symbols of the invisible forefathers” (p. 471). To key into this Igbo beauty about death, one needed to understand how the Igbo view or understand Life and death. Anetoh (2017:63) opines that it is the beliefs about life which influences the understanding of death. The work went ahead to list the various ways the Igbo understand life, gleaned from popular Igbo names, which includes that life is a priority (*Ndubuisi*), life is superior to wealth (*Ndukaku*), life is supreme (*Ndubueze*). Life continues after bodily death both in this material existence and in the spiritual domain. *Nnamdi* and *Nnemdi* are names which mean “My father lives on” and “My mother lives on” even when in reality they have died. The Igbo cherishes and values life. In a multidimensional thesis, Anuolam (1993) emphasized that the Igbo places premium value on life and shows in so many ways that life ought to be cherished, preserved and celebrated, albeit living its transience and temporality. The Igbo, therefore understand death as a transition from one form of life to another. According to Edeh (2007):

Even though the Igbos mourn their dead with grief and extend sympathy, as do other people, they are well aware that death is not an end but a transition. If a person dies, he is born into another life completely different from the one he had. This is the case with the ancestors (p. 75)

The dead who qualify to be counted among the ancestors operate the domain of *Anwu*. It is important to note that not all who die among the Igbo qualify to be ancestors. To qualify to be an ancestor, Okeke (2012) had opined that one should at least have had an heir, lived a very good moral life, received an elaborate and befitting funeral and lived fairly long enough to be referred to as old. There is an aspect of the Igbo population of ancestry which is often neglected. Okeke (2015) recognized these often neglected: “other men and women, single or

married, survived by only female children or by nochild at all provided they have lived according to the law and customs of the people and are given befitting funerals, also reach the land of the bliss but are not ancestors”. Yet he shied away from counting them among the ancestors. This researcher wondered what else they could possibly be, and rather thinks these disembodied spirits are integral part of the *Anw̄u* domain as ancestors; they are also part and parcel of the community of mortals like the recognized ancestors and are among *Um̄uanw̄u* living in the *Anw̄u* domain in the same way their mortal counterparts live in the *Az̄i* domain. To this group we also add women in general who lived morally good lives and were given befitting funeral.

Deriving from the foregoing, dying for the Igbo is not annihilation. In as much as dying and not being with other ancestors is not desirable, even then those who roam as *Akalogeli* after death are not annihilated. According to Kanu (2020:11):

Many of those who die a bad death often have their spirits hovering and causing havoc among the living members of the family or community. These spirits are called variously: *akalogili*, *ofogeli* or *nmuo mkpasa* or *uruchi*- spirit of destruction

Dimonye and Asiegbu (2023) underscored the role of *Mm̄onw̄u/Mmanw̄u* in the ritualization of life and death in very clear terms: “Accordingly, Igbo masquerade is a cultural mechanism used to explain the mysteries surrounding life and death” (p. 135). Therefore, it is *Mm̄onw̄u/Mmanw̄u* which illustrates this beauty of death, since through it, the dead lives on in visible and experiential ways. Therefore, *Mm̄onw̄u/Mmanw̄u* as the beauty of death refer to the conviction of the Igbo that to die is to transcend mortal existence into *Anw̄u*. Death is beautiful because it unleashes the power in humans to go on living as *Mm̄onw̄u/Mmanw̄u*. Among the Igbo, this mode of existence is revered more, more powerful and more acceptable than mortals and more. Death is beautiful because the dead do not actually cease to exist, but could live on as *Mm̄onw̄u/Mmanw̄u*. Death is actually the unravelling of the mystery of immortality by mortality which impresses that death is pain.

If *Mm̄onw̄u/Mmanw̄u* is made up of *Mmūo* and *Onw̄u*, then it will imply ‘the Spirit of Death’. Kail (2021) gave this Christian perspective on the ‘Spirit of Death’: “

There is a demon called the *spirit of death*. This is a spirit that seeks to bring terminal sickness, premature death, or tormenting fear of death. It works together with the spirit of infirmity to increase the affliction in a person’s life.

However, this is a far cry from the Igbo understanding of the spirit of death. *Mm̄onw̄u/Mmanw̄u* is a demonstration of the Igbo social philosophy which makes death an integral part of life. Igbo philosophy is not just an exercise in speculation or introspection, it is also demonstrable and practical wisdom. Onebunne (2024) made copious analysis and criticism of earlier scholars on their failure or neglect in giving Igbo philosophy an articulated definition, but ended up proposing *Igbo Philosophia*, whatever that may be. Like every other

western trained Igbo philosopher, Onebunne is mired in the mash of western methodology seeking within the Igbo environment equivalents to the handy concepts of western philosophy or he is seeking to cast Igbo reality in western conceptual schemes.

The sheets of Igbo philosophy is spread out in the Igbo environment and coded in its customs and traditions, proverbs, folklores, pithy-sayings, rituals, arts, music and even landscapes. In doing Igbo philosophy one's interpretative skills must span through intuition, introspection and insight. When lots of *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* are seen in the Igbo environment, it is, among other things, a demonstration and reminder that death is an integral part of life and that the dead is alive among the people. This is a generic understanding of *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*, it does not undermine the fact that each of them has its own social function. In other words, whatever function any *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* performs among the people, it is rooted in the spiritual realm from where *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* originated and is a reminder that dying is an integral part of living.

If *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* is made up of *Mmuo* and *Anwụ*, then it simply means the spirit of *Anwụ*. This combination agrees, in a tonal sense, particularly with *Mmanwụ* which is the alternative nomenclature to *Mmọnwụ* as used in this work. It underscores the fact that the *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* phenomenon is rooted in the domain of *Anwụ* as *Mmuo*, but manifests among humans as *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*. It specifies the domain of the spirits which could manifest as *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*. The spirits of *Akai* outside the reach, manipulation or conjuration of humans while Chi domain is rarely penetrable, but *Anwụ* is easily accessed by *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* initiates.

If *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* is made up of *Mma* and *Anwụ*, then it simply means the beauty of *Anwụ*. *Anwụ*, as we have seen above, is the third tier in the four domains of spiritual operations among the Igbo. It is the next to *Azị* in ascending order, whereas *Azị* is the domain of temporality, change, decay, manifestations, imitations, shadows and illusions. The Igbo, in so many ways, show their understanding of life in this physical and material world as temporary and fleeting; they know the pain, agony and sorrows replete of this domain of existence. Therefore, they live in plethora of rituals to dramatize the other side of existence and to cause its possible energy and power to sway on this earthly realm. The earthly realm is the *Azị* domain and the spirits of this domain are manifestations. The physical and material elements of *Azị* easily harness the spiritual energy of the domain. In their quest for power, protection, solutions, answers and control of their space, the Igbo plug to that domain, but only the mystics, adepts and experts attempt other domains beyond *Anwụ*. These options suggested above are mutually complementary. The individual concepts: *Mmuo*, *Mma*, *Ọnwụ* and *Anwụ*, all relate to the *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* phenomenon in very meaningful and insightful ways. *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* is a mystical connection between the physical and spiritual domain

and a tacit reminder for humans that the spirits (in their variety) are living part of their environment. According to Okoye (2020):

These ancestral spirits seen as concrete manifestations of the otherworldly existence are held in spiritual awe, regard, respect and deference. The Igbo ontological underpinnings lend substance and credibility to the ancestral mask tradition because the dead, the living and the unborn are in mutual proximity and coexistence. Therefore, ancestral masks every now and then are called up or on their own accord, visit the land of the living in covered or shrouded forms, loaded with ancestral wisdom and spiritual mannerisms during festivals (communal or individual) that range from harvest, community communions, ritual feasts, funerals, burials, dance festivals and remembrances. (p. 1).

Okoye's beautiful metaphysics was tainted with some taboos. To appeal to his non-Igbo and especially western readers, he used the term 'mask'. When he set out from the beginning to study masquerade, he was sure to stumble into that taboo. *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* are not masquerades, they are spirits; they are not just ancestral spirits, they are also pure spirits operating from the domain of *Anwu* together with the disembodied spirits of the ancestors. Yet Okoye is one of the very few scholars who take on the study of this phenomenon with the required mystical undertone it deserves. This subject is rife with delicate grounds because it is and is not at the same time.

The Social Philosophy of *Iti Mmonwu/Mmanwu* among the Igbo

Many have undertaken the study of *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* as masquerade from performance, sculptural, poetry, sociological, philosophical, religious and cultural perspectives. Yet it does seem that each study leaves much to be desired and researchers have not dared *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* to speak for itself. They rather impose ideas from western paradigms and biased foreign impressions on the *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* phenomenon. The action words used for the activities of *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* gives us clue as to the socio-cultural import and significance of *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* among the Igbo. The Igbo say: *IgbaMmṛnwu/Mmanwu*, *ImeMmṛnwu/Mmanwu* or *Iti Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu*. *IgbaMmṛnwu/Mmanwu* presumes dance. Uzoh and Ogboagha (2022) presented the idea of masquerade dance as entertainment during festivals, but that is not all *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* is about. Among the Anambra south-eastern people of Akpo, Amesi, Achina and environs, *IgbaMmṛnwu* is a peculiar music ensemble of *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* which simply means the drum dance of *Mmṛnwu*. This is because the lead instrument in the ensemble that controls the dance moves of *Mmṛnwu* is the drum called *NneIgba* (mother drum). Another nuance of *IgbaMmṛnwu/Mmanwu* is launching a new *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* not in circulation before. Whichever way, *IgbaMmṛnwu/Mmanwu* connotes the action of *IgbaMmṛnwu/Mmanwu* as merely dance.

Ime Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ is commonly used in the Imo north-eastern region of Aro-Ndizuogu and environs. *ImeMm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ* means celebrating *Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ*. In that culture area, *Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ* have multiple variety that the area well qualifies as the headquarters of *Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ* among the Igbo. This tradition of *Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ* spread even to Anambra south-eastern region mentioned earlier and the present researcher is an initiate in this tradition. In this region, there is a saying that *Igbo niile na-eti Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ mana Izuogu na ihe emeghi onye na-ebu ya n'isi* (all Igbo proclaim *Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ* but Aro Ndizuogu people carry it on top of their heads). Their very popular celebration of Ikeji festival could well fit for the largest *Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ* cultural carnival in Igbo land.

Iti Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ is of more general usage and central among the Igbo. *Iti* is proclaim, announce, manifest or reveal. *Iti Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ* simply means proclaiming, announcing, manifesting or revealing *Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ*. This action contains the social philosophy of *Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ* among the Igbo. Humans may get engrossed with material and physical engagement that it is often lost on them that the spirits are part and parcel of the their physical and material environment. *Iti Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ* is a tacit reminder that the spirits are always around watching, protecting, cautioning, validating, authenticating, confirming or endorsing human activities or otherwise. *Iti Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ* is a ritual form of proclaiming, manifesting, announcing or revealing the concealed spirits of the Human environment. This is the fundamental understanding of *Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ* activities in Igbo land.

Whatever activity or function the Igbo perform without *Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ* is incomplete. Spirits are integral parts of the Igbo population. This is why statements like that of Ele (2022) is an outrage: “The theory of masquerade as spirit is a lie. Christians by virtue of their calling do not propagate lies as they have rejected Satan the father of lies, his works and empty promises earlier at baptism (John 8:44; Matthew 28:19-20)” (p. 98). *Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ* are symbols of the spirits. From its Greek etymological root, “Symbol” is “*Sumbolon*”, a noun from the verb “*Sumballein*”, made up of two words “*Sum*” – together, “*Ballein*” – To throw”. Therefore, “*Sumballein*” means to throw together.

A symbol is the intrinsic fusion of an object with a subject in an inseparable way. The object makes present the subject in a real sense and the subject is experienced in its fullest reality in the object. Struck (2005) gave one of the deepest insights into the nexus of the symbol and symbolized. The work traced symbols to Pythagorean times. For Pythagoreans, symbols are “secret password or short, enigmatic verbal formula that verifies membership in a particular cult”. It elucidated further:

Knowledge of the secret symbol allows a person to gain access to higher tiers of enlightenment. In the deepest expression of this aspect, the symbol can be used after death to give the deceased access to the regions of the blessed, where souls live in splendor after their separation from their bodies. These symbols are indeed passports

but ones that facilitate the movement of humans toward the divine, and so set up conditions more congenial to the later development of the idea. This background underlies the early Christian usage of the Latin *symbolum* for the Apostle's Creed.

In the case of *Mm̀̀nwu/Mmanwu* among the Igbo, symbols are passports of re-entering human territorial boundaries in a physical form for the ancestral spirits and for other spirits passport to enter human territories to play designated roles for the proper functioning of the community. The symbol stretches the Igbo cognitive energy from the visible object to the invisible subject in a way that the unseen becomes real. *Mm̀̀nwu/Mmanwu* are indeed the spirits they symbolize and their activities, human as they may be, are regarded spiritual. Their words cast in human sound are exactly the communication of the spirit. To expound on the social philosophy of *Mm̀̀nwu/Mmanwu*, this ontological exposition must be put in place. On this note, designation of the African as *Homo Symbolicus* by Kanu (2021) becomes apt. By this he meant that the African “is not just a symbol-making being, but a symbolizing being”. The Igbo is a classic case of Kanu’s depiction because among them symbols are exactly what they symbolize.

Social functions are occasions of ritualizing aspects of the community life of the Igbo. Once the humans are done with the necessary rituals, *Iti Mm̀̀nwu/Mmanwu* will be next in the agenda, it is not just to entertain, it is the spirits which are revealed as part of the deal. *Iti Mm̀̀nwu/Mmanwu* is at the soul of Igbo life which gives them the requisite re-assurances that they are at peace with their spirit others (*Chi*), benevolent and beneficiary spirits (*mm̀̀ọ ndi na-emere anyi ihe na mm̀̀ọ ndi anyi na emere ihe*) and ancestral spirits (*ndi mbu na ndi egede*). All these are the variety of spirits which can be manifest or revealed in physical form.

The social philosophy of *Iti Mm̀̀nwu/Mmanwu* builds on the Igbo understanding of community. Mbiti (1985:83-275) and Gbenda (2006:7) referred to the living-dead as integral parts of the African community. This is true for the Igbo. For instance, consulting *Afa* among the Igbo is not a religious activity or a form of religious expression of the Igbo. Consulting *Afa* is a social/moral duty/imperative aimed at the effective functioning of the community. *Afa* is not just a method of divination; it is a social mechanism of bringing the spirit-end of the community’s population into the community’s activities. So also *Iti Mm̀̀nwu/Mmanwu* is a social imperative through which the spirit population of the community are conjured to manifest and participate in the community life and activities. Isidienu and Onyekwelu (2022) had itemized the social functions of *Mm̀̀nwu/Mmanwu* thus: maintenance of law and order, agents of justice, corrective measure and instrument of entertainment. Yet there are more which *Mm̀̀nwu/Mmanwu* brings to bear among the Igbo, but it is important to note that whatever social function it is, there are also the human counterparts to them. This simply shows that human population is incomplete in Igbo demography without the spirit population and the human activities are incomplete without their spirit counterpart. *Iti Mm̀̀nwu/Mmanwu*

is the means of ensuring the participation of the spirits in the community life of the Igbo. The spiritual elements of the Igbo environment are superior to the human elements in terms of essence. *Iti Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* and all other actions and activities associated with it are ritual acts and processes through which the superior influence of the spirits are showcased to reveal the spirit-world and precise actions and functions of each individual entity. They remind the Igbo of the ceaseless caution required to live within this sphere of existence.

Among the Igbo there are *Obere Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* (Minor *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*) and *Nnukwu Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* (Major *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*), there are also *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* *Ụtutu/Ehizie* (Day *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*) and *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* *Abali/Anyasi* (Night *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*). *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* can also be categorized by gender and age. For instance, there are *Okoha/Okenye Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* (Aged *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*) and *Umuaka/Umuazi Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* (Young *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*); there are also *Agboghọ Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* (Lady *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*), *Okorobia Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* (Gentleman *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*) and *Nwaike/Nwata Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* (Child *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*). This needed to be explored so as not to strait-jacket the social roles of *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* among the Igbo or throw a blanket judgement on everything *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*.

Obere Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ (Minor *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*) are community generic spirits which developed organically from the community's social structure. Their activities and operations are home-grown and their origins are within the boundaries of the community. Categorized as minor does not limit or minimize their significance or symbolic relevance as *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*. They are part of the bona fide population of spirits in the community which socially, mystically and cosmologically compliment the human population. Their peculiarity is that the community is at home with them; they are indispensable and inalienable spirits and integral parts of the community. In traditional society, being initiated into this category of *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* is an essential rite of passage especially for young males.

Nnukwu Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ (Major *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*) are spirit manifestations anywhere beyond ordinary. Most times, they are evidences of intra-Igbo cultural exchange. From the community perspective, *Nnukwu Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* are not generic and are not integral part of the typical Igbo community. They are cultic in nature and admit of voluntary membership. Many times they unleash hostility to non-members and on the community as a way of showing power, strength and dominance. This category of *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ* can be used by strong men or monarchs who expand their territories by invasion for the purposes of subduing conquered territories and for extortions. When *Omabe* and *Oriokpa* in the Nsukka area are traced to the Attah of Igala who annexed the area in the nineteenth century, they fall into the category of *Nnukwu Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*.

Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ *Ụtutu/Ehizie* (Day *Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*) operates during the day in full daylight. They do not engage in any clandestine activities. Both *Obere Mmọnwụ/Mmanwụ*

and *Nnukwu Mmọnwu/Mmanwu* may operate during the day. This category is based on time, not type. They are symbols with which the Igbo ritualize the operations of the spirits in the midst of human activities. They make spirits present in human affairs, market activities, funerals, festivities, title-taking. Their activities range from education, policing, entertainment, sports to other tailored *Mmọnwu/Mmanwu* exhibitions.

Mmọnwu/Mmanwu Abali/Anyasi (Night *Mmọnwu/Mmanwu*) operate in the night and in the absence of any kind of light. In most Igbo communities, initiation into it is volitional. At the same time the elderly, noble men and men of worth do not need to be initiated to be in their midst or participate in their activities. These symbolize the ever alert and active Igbo world which is awake even when the whole world is sleeping. They keep track of the most hidden human activities to give the Igbo some sense of social alertness and community consciousness even in their most private affairs. *Mmọnwu/Mmanwu Abali/Anyasi* excludes age because adult talks and activities are integral part of it. Given its timing, this category of *Mmọnwu/Mmanwu* can easily be abused or turned into a sinister force. Yet the abuse does not diminish the use.

Okoha/Okenye Mmọnwu/Mmanwu are spirit manifestations who exhibit/portray aged features and characters. *Okoha/Okenye Mmọnwu/Mmanwu* are specific; they also organically develop from the community's social structure, representing generational categories in the spirit realm. *Okoha/Okenye Mmọnwu/Mmanwu* appeal to the elderly; the younger folks approach its presence with the same decorum, reverence and comportment deserving of elders in Igbo moral demands. This category of *Mmọnwu/Mmanwu* is often very few in the community; they are moral vanguards and deposits of the ancient *Mmọnwu/Mmanwu* ethics, reminding the younger folks of the proper symbolism and roles of *Mmọnwu/Mmanwu* among the people. When younger *Mmọnwu/Mmanwu* engages in any infraction or conflicts arise among them, it is *Okoha/Okenye Mmọnwu/Mmanwu* which arbitrates and settles.

Umuaka/Umuazi Mmọnwu/Mmanwu (Young *Mmọnwu/Mmanwu*) or *Okorobia Mmọnwu/Mmanwu* (Gentleman *Mmọnwu/Mmanwu*) are the commonest in the community. They are young, vibrant, exuberant; sometimes belligerent and even violent. They symbolize the youthful spirit of the community; its virility, masculinity, strength and valour. Typical of youth, these positive vibes, when not properly checked or channelled, may come off as violence, pugnacity and intimidation. These category of *Mmọnwu/Mmanwu* often engage in contests which could be gut-churning and horrid. Igbo communities are awake to the activities of this category of *Mmọnwu/Mmanwu*, because they know the excesses of youth and their delinquency. It is important to mention that their abuse is not the traditional *Mmọnwu/Mmanwu* norm and it takes the community to mitigate them.

Agbogho Mmọnwu/Mmanwu (Lady *Mmọnwu/Mmanwu*) are lady-spirits. They represent the feminine gender of the spirit population. These spirits are dance freaks and they aim at

entertainment. Their movements, dance steps and gesticulations are effeminate. Generally, *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* bear sticks with which they strike people to caution people, ward them off or punish them. *AgboghṛMmṛnwu/Mmanwu* do not bear sticks because they attract people more than scare them. This category of *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* symbolizes the feminine characters of attraction, accommodation and affection.

Nwaiṛkpṛ/NwataMmṛnwu/Mmanwu (Child *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu*) are children spirits representing that part of the community's population between the ages of seven and sixteen. Children who fall into this age category organize themselves without supervision to sustain this level of *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu*. This is one of the ways the young Igbo get trained for future leadership and get themselves ready for continuing the Igbo heritage. *Nwaiṛkpṛ/NwataMmṛnwu/Mmanwu* display exactly the character of their age; they do not exude the often-scary aura of *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu*. Children create close-knit social circles around each *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* and begin on time to participate in the community life in accordance with their level. *Nwaiṛkpṛ/NwataMmṛnwu/Mmanwu* is an evidence that the Igbo celebrate the spirit of children who had died even though their death were painfully unacceptable. As *Nwaiṛkpṛ/NwataMmṛnwu/Mmanwu*, they manifest again in their childlike simplicity; happy and innocent, not angry and capricious as often depicted.

The Igbo's is a community of the living and the dead; humans and spirits. The phenomenon of *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* and the practice of *Iti Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* is rooted in this social philosophy. The Igbo community by its very nature is inclusive of *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu*. Therefore, *Iti Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* is the most empirical way the Igbo feel the presence of the dead and the spirits who they believe are integral part of their population. *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* is empirical or experiential, but is not understood as merely so. *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* is not an empirical data to be studied by the dissection of its component parts, subjecting them to any form of physical examination to understand it. That kind of study will destroy the very meaning which should be sought in the study of *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu*. It is that kind of study which will understand *Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* as 'Masquerade' and *Iti Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* as 'Masquerading'. These are derogatory ways of understanding this phenomenon which makes it difficult to dialogue with it in a healthy and fair manner.

Conclusion

Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu is both a metaphysics and social philosophy among the Igbo. As metaphysics, it is being whose act it is to demonstrate a form. That form is a physical revelation of the invisible and intangible spirit. As a social philosophy, it expresses the social organization, connections and administration of the Igbo community which is basically dual in structure; a composite of human and spirit. *Iti Mmṛnwu/Mmanwu* is the very social activity which showcases these metaphysics and social philosophy. Studying these phenomena is not

a matter of empirical observation and analysis; this work settled for ethnomethodology to make sense of the ordinary which eludes the grasp of many a researchers. Ethnomethodology focuses on how people use common sense to make sense of the world. This common sense is often seen in their every day practices or use of language. *Iti Mm̀onwụ/Mmanwụ* and its symbolic expression among the Igbo can be profitably studied within the ambient of ethnomethodology. This work was conceived in fairness to Igbo religious culture. Participating in the culture gave the writer the advantage of an insider's perspective. Being a practicing Christian also offered the insider's Christian impression of *Iti Mm̀onwụ/Mmanwụ*. This work was undertaken to inform Christianity of the nature of the phenomenon which will help in the ongoing dialogue between Igbo religious culture and Christianity, on the one hand, and inculturation, on the other hand. Without prejudice to the previous works on *Mm̀onwụ/Mmanwụ*, this work observed that referring to *Mm̀onwụ/Mmanwụ* as masquerade is misleading already in those works and makes their content questionable.

Mm̀onwụ/Mmanwụ is not what the researcher observed in an empirical examination, if it were, then *Mm̀onwụ/Mmanwụ* is masquerade. *Mm̀onwụ/Mmanwụ* is what the Igbo say it is – spirit forms of accessible and conjurable spiritual entities who are integral parts of the Igbo universe. *Iti Mm̀onwụ/Mmanwụ* is the ritualization of their emergence and manifestation, or the proclamation of their appearance among humans. It is an activity which is founded on the Igbo social philosophy in which humans and spirits co-habit the Igbo universe. *Mm̀onwụ/Mmanwụ* is an Igbo community heritage whose meaning is found in the environment of the community of its operation. In this environment, the community is supreme; *Mm̀onwụ/Mmanwụ* is just an aspect in its social organization and administration.

Mm̀onwụ/Mmanwụ is ontologically founded at the level of *Anwụ* in the Igbo mystical hierarchy. It is the evidence of the beauty of death, the spirit of the dead, the spirit or beauty of *Anwụ*. Whichever is at the basis of its origin, *Mm̀onwụ/Mmanwụ* is more than meets the eye or than can be subjected to empirical analysis. A roll call of the manifestations also indicate the limitations of the Igbo in accessing the highest level of the Igbo spiritual hierarchy referred to as *Aka* and the sparse access to the level of *Chi*. *Mm̀onwụ/Mmanwụ* is an element of Igbo religious culture, without which Igbo social religious philosophy cannot be fully understood.

This study went beyond the common opinions pandered by researchers, which had often boxed *Mm̀onwụ/Mmanwụ* into the corner of ancient Igbo policing outfit, cult groups fostering the interest of members, occultic anti-life practices, anti-social organizations or even Igbo intra-community terrorist groups. *Mm̀onwụ/Mmanwụ* is an age-long integral part of the Igbo community social structure which expresses and represents the spirit population in each Igbo community. It is asymbolic expression whose secrets are custodied by the community; its continued relevance and effectiveness also sustained by the community.

Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ can be entertaining, but amidst that entertainment, messages are passed which non-initiates cannot read. During entertainments every-initiate pays attention with utmost alert to read the beats and the moves communicating very important messages for the community in artful codes. *Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ* is serious business and engaging for those who are initiated into its secrets. Even as Christianity is tending towards the scare and condemnation of *Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ*, God can be understood in terms of *Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ* as mentioned earlier and Church leaders understood as *Nnukwu Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ*. As a matter of fact, the new Igbo community is Christian. If it will be Igbo in the true sense, then it should embrace the metaphysics and social philosophy of *Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ*; peopled by the Igbo who are the modern custodians of *Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ* who more than condemn *Mm̄onwụ/Mmanwụ* factor in this philosophy in interpreting the Christian content. The Igbo religious culture should not be the Christian obstacle; it should be the Christian vehicle taking the dynamic and progressive Igbo culture to a better and Christian destination where it is already headed.

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