



TOWARD CONFLUENCE OF CHRISTIAN AND IGBO TRADITIONAL BELIEFS IN MMANWU (MASQUERADE) AND FATHER CHRISTMAS: A COMPARATIVE SYMBOLIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This article explores masquerade celebrations among the Christian and Igbo Traditional believers. The study investigates the Igbo masquerading system and Santa Claus (Father Christmas) and discovered that there were no reservations around participation, despite Christianity maintaining that the former is a pagan and fetish practices. Many reasons emerged for participation in the Igbo masquerading system: attachment to Igbo culture, the quest to belong to the community/the question of identity, the communitarian aspect of masquerade celebrations, the challenges of enculturation, cultural revivalism, and the commercialization of masquerades. Contrary to early (Western) missionaries' prediction that Christianity would erode the Igbo people's 'fetish', masquerades, the Western Santa Claus (Father Christmas) is being promoted against the Igbo masquerading system. However, despite this misrepresentation of Igbo cultural heritage, traditional masquerading has kept thriving in Igboland, perpetuated by the Christian youth in a bid to keep their cultural practices alive. This indicates that Christianity, despite its longstanding presence, has not succeeded in curtailing this growing phenomenon. As a qualitative research, the researchers adopted the primary and secondary sources of data collection and the culture area approach for data analysis. The study recommends an integration of Igbo traditional and Christian religious beliefs in analyzing the astrophysical cosmology of masquerades through mutual dialogue of synthesis and hybridization of the good elements of each of the cultures, rather than using extreme acts of mutual extinction.

Keywords: Masquerade, Confluence, Father Christmas, Symbolic Analysis

Introduction

Research found that regardless of centuries of Christian presence in Igboland, the people fully identified with the masquerade celebration. They believed the festivals to be cultural revival exercises, whether Christianity approved or not. This has certain implications for Christians and the traditional Igbo community. Church members publicly indulging in masquerade rituals cast Christianity in a negative light. Also, some aspects of masquerade celebrations are still rooted in barbarism. A great example is the indiscriminate flogging of passersby during masquerade processions. (Nwala 2013; Okongwu 2016; Uche 2018). The research observed many masquerade celebrations in many Igbo towns, noting strong youth participation. These young people say they are purely driven by cultural revival, as masquerades represent an important element of their local culture.

In the 19th century, Christian Western missionaries arriving in Nigeria held very little regard for aspects of Igbo culture. Especially the parts involving spiritualism and ancestor worship. The missionaries were averse to it, condemning the people's cultural practices and replacing some of them with imported dogma. This was the case in Santa Claus (Father Christmas). In



the 1980s, local masquerade practices suffered another setback with the emergence of Pentecostalism in Nigeria and Igboland in particular. Pentecostal teaching emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit and the direct experience of the presence of God by believers. It was in direct conflict with masquerade practices. Traditional culture was therefore branded as ‘paganism’ and strongly discouraged (Nwonu 2014; Uchendu 2018). In the 1960s, African theologians began to question the Western forms of Christianity in Africa. These leading theologians and scholars began to adapt local Christian practices to fit into the existing culture. Worship began to take on some of the features of its local context. A good example is how worship was conducted in church services and mass celebrations. Igbo vernacular, local drums and homegrown melodies gave Christianity an “African touch” (Nwokeabia, 2016).

This process is called enculturation and it has also helped the masquerade revival. According to Ozoaku (2018), this is part of the reason for young Nigerians’ reversion to masquerade practices, particularly within the Roman Catholic context. Some of the youth see a relationship between inculturation and their quest to revive masquerades in Igboland since both are forms of cultural revival. Christianity, for all its dominance, has not completely succeeded in deterring members interested in local masquerade celebrations. Despite the long history of churches and religious opposition in the area, the religion still cannot topple local culture.

Christianity and the African Traditional Worldview

The African traditional worldview is deeply entrenched within the lives of many African people, regardless of their geographical location. Krabill (1987) wrote the following significant words: “White folks come to Africa - they stay for a while, they kick up a lot of dust - and they go. But the traditions remain - deeply rooted, far beneath the dust, in the African soil”. (p. 54). A similar sentiment comes from the African Indigenous Church leaders, Ngada and Mofokeng (2001) “we are Africans before being Christians. To deny our Africanness would be to forfeit our God-given lifestyle and to adopt an imposed culture. (p.17). These quotes are rather striking. They are also disturbing, at least to Christian ministers who find some unbiblical features in the African traditional worldview. Christians cannot fully accept the insinuation that one cannot change their worldview because of our faith in God. Nevertheless, worldviews are not easily changed and to understand them well is a good first step in meeting the challenge. It will give one insight into the underlying motives and characteristic behavioural traits of a people, which will guard against a superficial ministry that preaches Christ, but does not engage the underlying worldview (Henry, 2010). Sire (1977) views the concept of worldview as “a set of presuppositions ... which we hold ... about the basic makeup of our world’ (p.11)’. Yung (2007) says that “it is the universe within which a people group lives and that it is foundational to people's values, shaping their culture” (p.438). He adds that any threat to one's worldview will be unconsciously resisted” (p.438). All people and groups have a worldview and some of them overlap in various details. It has been found that there are many common elements in the worldviews of African groups. In Igboland, one can legitimately refer to an African traditional worldview. A major part of this worldview is African Traditional Religion (ATR). In fact, to a great extent, the two terms are interchangeable, because religion affects every part of their lives. Religious and secular aspects are integrated (Henry, 2010).

The term “traditional” is used, because the worldview has been passed down. Some Africans have moved away from their traditional worldview to some extent and have partly adopted another worldview. The African traditional worldview, however, is still very much alive in



Igboland. Despite the domination of Christianity in Igbo region, ATR has not declined at all (Okongwu 2016). Something that keeps ATR strong in the hearts of Africans, according to Gehman (2005), is that even those who live in cities ‘maintain personal contact with their rural homes where ATR is strongest’ (p.6). Apart from that factor, there has been a resurgence of ATR in recent years, promoted by political action and the media. Many Africans seek to affirm their cultural and religious roots. As mentioned earlier, one of the aspects of ATR is the Igbo masquerading system, which is the crux of this research.

Igbo Masquerading System

In Igbo land, masquerades are seen as superior beings. When a masquerade is seen in public, they have to be treated with respect because it is believed that they embodies both the spirit and human worlds (Ngwoke 2015; Nwadike 2018). There is also a popular belief that the masquerades spring from the soil, making them higher than man, and regarded as such. Masquerading may require a one-person team or a team of more people which may include vocalists who hail the masquerades, drummers and players who play the instruments, advisers and then, the masquerade itself. Most of these masquerades have a mask on their face and are covered from head to toe with some piece of clothing or/and bamboo rafters Ngada and Mofokeng (2001). Depending on the type of masquerade and where it comes from, it may differ. Some of the masks are meant to be beautiful because the masquerade connotes beauty among others. On the other hand, the others are sinister and are feared whenever they make an appearance. In Igbo land, masquerades appear during traditional celebrations, funerals and festivals, particularly the New Yam Festival. Every masquerade holds distinct attributes that distinguish it and build a storyline or a personality. They may be a war masquerade, or a pretty one, or an old one. They may also be specialized in skills such as dancing, acrobatics, talking and a host of others (Ugwu 2010).

Here are some festive masquerades that may be found in Igbo land:

Adamma

Adamma is a contemporary maiden spirit mask worn by men and particular to some villages in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. The ceremonial masquerade is named after *Adamma*, a name loosely translated to ‘beautiful woman’ and reserved for the first daughter of a family. She is always gorgeously dressed in colourful attire and dances so beautifully that most times, people wonder whether it’s actually a man under the mask.

Ijele

The *Ijele* masquerade originated from the Old Anambra state, and it is the largest mask system ever to enter the history of the world masking tradition. *Ijele* is the King of all Masquerades and in the olden days, used to have forty-five different masquerades perform on top of it. Currently, these forty-five masquerades are represented by the figurines seen on top of *Ijele*. It is the climax of all masquerades and performs alone and mostly last. In many communities in South-East Nigeria, the *Ijele* is brought to evoke fertility and a bountiful harvest feature (Okongwu 2016). It also makes an appearance during celebrations, burial ceremonies and other special occasions.

Mkpamkpanku

This masquerade is a very stern one and also fully masculine-featured. They are typically brisk, aggressive, agile and notorious in their own way. They are also mainly promoted by the youths



because they are active masquerades so much so that about two or more strong men are ever around it with a rope that is tied around its waist to draw it back from overacting.

Izaga

The *Izaga* masquerade is probably the tallest Igbo masquerade and can be seen as a comic masquerade or an entertainment one. They can grow shorter and grow taller as well. They make an appearance during traditional ceremonies or festivals for the sole aim of satisfying the observers.

Odo

The Odo is a masquerade peculiar to the Agbaja (Ngwo and environs) people of Enugu state. Typically, the *Odo* masquerade represents a deity who provides the living with a chance to commune with their dead in line with belief and customs. During *Odo* festival, the dead are said to work freely among the living through the manifestation of this masquerade. There are hosts of other masquerades in Igbo land that serve various purposes and various functions. Just as they are expected to be revered, they are also not allowed to abuse their powers.

Santa Claus: Origin and Foundations

The legend of a jolly red man who gives presents to children on Christmas Eve is based on the German and Dutch traditions of St Nicholas, a real-life bishop from ancient Greece. He was known for secretly giving bags of gold to the needy, for offering bread and sacks of grain to the hungry, and for even rescuing three girls from a life of prostitution (Yung, 2007). An icon of St Nicholas is depicted as having a short brown beard, black eyes, and brown hair. Judging from Anderson (1992) St. Nicholas lived far from the North Pole and was born in the eastern Mediterranean during the Roman Empire, nearly 2,000 years ago. According to historical records, St Nicholas was a Christian bishop in the ancient coastal city of Myra, what is now the modern-day city of Demre in southern Türkiye (Baldwin, 1988; Bediako, 1999). According to Yung (2007) "Nicholas was known as a very charitable bishop; he looked after his people very well" (p.65). She says he would leave coins and grain on people's windowsills or doorsteps, while also forcing merchants to sell bread and other staples at affordable prices. During his time, bishops like him had charitable oversight of their cities and would hold church services and festivals, as well as officiate marriages and baptisms. De Vries (2015) says, "They also had more and more responsibility for public works ... so the bishops were in charge of repairing roads and fountains, and sometimes even helping with the defense of the city against pirates," (p.65). St Nicholas travelled widely across the Mediterranean region in his later years, before dying of old age in his 70s. He was originally buried in Myra but his remains were stolen by merchant sailors in 1087 and taken to Bari, Italy, where they are now kept in a sarcophagus. The 2014 facial reconstruction of St Nicholas includes his broken nose (Anderson, 1992). Though St Nicholas likely had a beard for most of his life, he was not quite the ruddy-cheeked, blue-eyed character that we now see in storybooks and animations. According to the most recent facial reconstruction as reported by Gehman (2005), he had dark brown eyes, an olive complexion and a broken nose. "The broken nose may suggest something about his character, he was considered a bit of a rebel — he may have come into conflict with people. He could have just fallen down some stairs, but it's quite a heavy-duty break" (p.56).



As for his clothing, Brown (2008) says there was no consistent dress code for bishops at the time but St Nicholas likely wore a red tunic once he became more prominent. "The red does come later on in Italy when he is believed to be a cardinal in the Middle Ages, basically because he's a bishop and he's important"(p.34). St Nicholas's generosity and gift-giving brought him renown, but it was thanks to his geographical position that word of his good deeds travelled far. St Nicholas's better-known tale was about him helping three sisters pay their dowries (Gehman, 2005). Brown (2008) says he rose to prominence as the patron saint of children and youths, partly because one of his better-known tales involved three young sisters whose family could not afford their marriage dowries. St Nicholas is said to have secretly given them the money so that the girls could marry and escape a life of prostitution. In one of the earliest depictions of this story, he is shown as dropping three bags of coins through the family home's window. In other medieval paintings, the girls are shown as having hung their stockings to dry and the coins falling into them — this may be the origin of today's Christmas stocking-stuffing traditions (Gehman, 2005). How St Nicholas became associated with December 25 is also not clear given he already had his own Christian festival. Brown (2008) says, "I was quite surprised about how he ended up getting attached to Christmas Day because he had his own gift-giving tradition, which was on his feast day of December 6" (p. 78). But it was ultimately an American poem written in 1823 that standardized the image of Santa Claus — the English pronunciation of "Sinterklaas" — as a "jolly old elf" riding a sleigh driven by eight reindeer on Christmas Eve. The poem now known as *The Night Before Christmas* was widely popular and inspired a new era of Santa iconography. Such is the way that a beloved gift-giver from ancient Greece became irretrievably wed to Christmas in the popular imagination (McCloskey 1995; Afan 2003; Müller, 2013).

A Comparative Analysis of Igbo Masquerade System with Christian Santa Claus (Father Christmas)

Masquerades are a very important part of African culture. Initially, in some African cultures, these masquerades formed part of religious ceremonies. Music, dancing, and costumes, including masks, are key elements of masquerades. Akubor (2018) writes: "As far as the African people are concerned, masquerades are ancestral spirits who periodically visit their living forebears in masquerade forms. Their visits are regarded as spiritual interventions to the world of the living and as a result are highly venerated; they are a symbolic resurrection of the ancestors" (p.18). To Ifeku-Ibaji (2017) *Mmanwu* (masquerade) symbolized both the ancestral shrine as well as represented the resurrected spirits of a dead elder, whose appearance and performance played a protective and regulatory role in the affairs of the living. Specifically, it governed the laws that were irrevocable and punishable by death.

From the above, it is clear that Africa and the Africans' perception of the masquerades is completely different from the view of their European counterparts who limit the masquerade to objects of pleasure and entertainment. This is because while to the western world, anything under a mask can pass for a masquerade, to Africa and the Africans, the masquerades are the dead ancestors among the living, which is hinged on the belief that human life does not end in physical death. It is their conception that life is made up of the body and soul; and the soul is conceived as the spirit; and the soul is also conceived. In this way, at the death of any man, the spirit continues its existence in some indescribable environment, where they also communes with the living. The spirit world is seen as a duplication of life here on earth and spirits transform into persons (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2007). However, based on the mythology behind the Santa Claus otherwise known as Saint Nicholas or Kris Kringle, its traditions cannot be



compared with an Igbo/African masquerade system. While they may have some similarities in terms of style and hidden face behind the mask, their relevance, perception and substance are completely divergent.

Conclusion

It is considered irrational to believe an African/Igbo masquerade as evil and Santa Claus as good. It is a denigration of African culture and a celebration of white supremacy over African culture. It is, however, the position of this study that masquerading in Igboland is in many respects, a manifestation of the traditional belief system of the African/Igbo people. It is organized for general entertainment, social reformation and maintenance of peace and order. In general and according to Igbo beliefs, masquerades represent images of dead relatives coming from the world beyond to this earth. From our findings, we have compared the practice of the Igbo masquerading system with the introduction of Santa Claus (Father Christmas) as a replacement for the former. It was discovered that Igbo people believe Christianity has denigrated their cultural practices for a long time. That is why they are working to revive and uphold Igbo cultural/traditional practices.

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