

The Philosophical Appraisal of Masquerading in Igbo Social Milieu and the Christian Theology of the Resurrection of the Body: An Analytic Investigation

Ignatius Nnaemeka Onwuatuegwu PhD

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka

Abstract

In every culture, there is a distinct figure or attribute which is held in high regard and at a sacred admiration in that culture which may not likely be so in other cultures. The culture of the people has been identified as the people's way of living. It is a phenomenon that is held in a respectful status which passes from one generation to another, as each generation of the people owes it as a sacred duty and obligation to retain and preserve the culture and transmit it undiluted to the upcoming generation. In every cultural setting, there are agents of socialization. These agents of socialization are greatly levied with the burden of passing this cultural heritage to the next generation. The agents may be families, age-grade, Umu-Ada, Nze-na-Ozo, Council of elders, Priest and Priestess of the gods. The above highlights are true and also peculiar to the Igbo social milieu. Masquerading is one of the significant cultural heritage of the Igbo people. Though, people of other cultures, especially the western cultures may see masquerading as a played out a script for fun; masquerading in the Igbo social milieu means more than mere fun as it invokes the ancestral spirits of the ancestors and has Igbo religious rites and rituals involved in it. This paper tends to do a philosophical appraisal of the concept of masquerading in the Igbo social milieu and will also advance a discourse on the theology of the resurrection of the body (a belief held by Christians); reason is that there is a claim of similarities between the belief in resurrection of the body and that of masquerading in Igbo social milieu. The paper will achieve the general objectives via the use of an analytic investigation.

Keywords: Masquerading, Social milieu, Culture, Cultural heritage, Resurrection, Belief, Philosophical

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Introduction

Scholars have defined Masquerade as a covering, concealment and a disguise device by an individual or group with the view to represent a spirit, an animal, philosophy or an idea; while they consider that costumes associated with masquerades as the physical representation of this disguise. This definition contradicts the view of most African societies of masquerades and their costumes completely. In most African societies, masquerades are associated with ancestors, goodwill and governance. They defended and safeguarded society and accordingly prevented all potent threats to their existence and that of related Institutions. (Onyeneke, 1987)

An assertion in a study states that (Internet):

“In every culture, there are certain ideas explicit in the interaction of different elements which in turn sometimes act as an instrument of social control with which different cultural segments are held together. Prior to the spread of Islamic and Christian influences, the people believed in a complex structure of spirits and ancestors who influenced the living. Traditional beliefs reflect the wholeness of the universe. The various elements of which constituted not only the living but also the dead and spirits;... Throughout history, these village ancestors performed the rites of transference and played a protective and regulatory role in the affairs of the living. Specifically, it governed the laws which were irrevocable and punishable by death.”

From the above, it is clear that Africa and the Africans perception of the masquerades are entirely 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 masquerade 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. In this way, at the death of any man, the spirit continues its existence in some indescribable environment, where they also commune with the living. The spirit world is seen as a duplication of life here on earth and spirits transform into persons (Akintayo, 2008).

Africans are described to be notoriously religious. An explication of the above statement means that the totality of an African activity has a religious undertone be it his tradition, and culture. Masquerading in Igbo tradition has so many perspectives and functions, such as religious, entertainment, recreational, among others. Today there seems to be a subtle decline in this tradition of Igbo people. Also, in some areas, there is a radical

and massive resurrection of masquerading in Igbo tradition.

In the nature of the concepts of masquerading in the Igbo social milieu, there are acclaimed similarities or better still, a common factor between the concept and practice of masquerading and that of the theological belief of the resurrection of the body. Based on the theological teachings and beliefs, the resurrection of the body is one of the predominant or paramount teachings and beliefs of Christian theology. The Christians believe when a person dies, irrespective of how the body is buried and laid, there are tendencies that the person will come back to life during the resurrection of the dead by their saviour, Jesus Christ (Ordia, and Ukeni, 2016)

This Christian theology in the resurrection of the body is rooted in the stories contained in their spiritual book concerning the resurrection of their master and proponent of the Christian religion; Jesus Christ. The stories have it that Jesus Christ was arrested by the Roman empire and was subsequently killed by way of crucifixion on the cross at Calvary in a place popularly referred to as Golgotha. It was recorded that he resurrected after three days. More interesting is that he prophesied about his resurrection prior to its occurrence. Upon his appearance to his followers, his followers began to spread the information about his resurrection from one place to another; though the Roman authority disputed the information as being distorted information, saying that followers came by night and stole the body of their master (McGrath, 2001).

The resurrection of Jesus Christ as purportedly taught by the followers found a way into the scriptures used by the Christians and over the years since the inception of Christianity as religion, the Christians tenaciously believe that just like Jesus Christ their master resurrected from the dead, that any Christian who died in the belief shall also resurrect to inherit eternal inheritance and everlasting life (White, 2014). This may be like to the concept of masquerading in the Igbo social milieu where the Igbos believe that the Mmonwu or Mmuo (spirits the dead) of the ancestors is resurrected in the body of the masquerade for a while and will be returned to the spirit world through proper rituals and rites.

The concepts of Masquerading in Igbo Social Milieu

The pertinent question that members of Igbo people who are agog have continued to ask is what the origin of masquerading in Igbo tradition is? This is a question that has not found an answer till now in the Igbo nation. The enigmatic nature of providing an answer to the above question lies in the oral tradition of Igbo culture that lacked proper documentation. So, an attempt to provide an answer in this recent time is better described as a hypothesis since most of the core information about the origin of masquerading in Igbo tradition was lost through oral means. Be that as it may, an appeal to reason and experience of Igbo people have suggested what might be the origin of masquerading in Igbo tradition (Adebari, 2010).

From the purview that ancient Igbo people were merely farmers who engaged in tedious farm work during the planting season and another tedious work during the harvesting season, masquerading was introduced as a recreational activity among Igbo male folk. After cultivation and planting season there seems to be a break or less hard work to be done on the farm. The major work at this period is weeding, which is always restricted to female folk of Igbo people. As a way of thanking the boys and men for the hard work they have engaged in and as an encouragement to the future work that is about to come (harvesting season) they were allowed to masquerade (Chiene, 1990). That is why in most Igbo land masquerading lasts between two to three months after which they cease from displaying. This also explains why women are not allowed to engage in masquerading in Igbo land because the period is seen as the time they should be busy in the farms weeding. It is pertinent to note here that in Igbo tradition today, there is no universal period of masquerading; any community determines the period and modus operandi of their masquerades (Chiene, 1990).

Moreover, apart from the above period of masquerading in Igbo tradition, masquerades are also allowed to parade during festivals. Festivals have to do with essential celebrations in a particular community. The Igbo people have festivals such as the new yam festival, different coronations etc. Ipso facto, masquerading in Igbo tradition is shrouded in secrecy. This is also one of the reasons women are jettisoned from the activity. Igbo society is such a patriarchal society that conceives women as porous and unable to keep secrets (Anyabe, 2006). Because of the above conception of Igbo people, it is not everybody that qualifies to be a member of masquerade group or cult. Therefore, membership is restricted to male folk, and an initiation ceremony follows it. It is in the initiation ceremony that the secrets are disclosed to the new member. It is also important to note that the initiation ceremony is not a funny experience for the person who receives it. This is because his masculinity is tested during an initiation ceremony. Also, the displays of masquerades are welcomed with pomp and pageantry in Igbo society (Duerdon, 1974).

Different communities in Igbo have so many different masquerades they display. However, most often, what seems to be universal among the masquerades is that they are always on a mask; this is to make the identity of the person obscure. The concept that masquerades posit in Igbo tradition is that they are representations of the living dead in Igbo tradition; therefore, some of them dress dreadfully to show the terrifying nature of the spirits they represent. In Igbo cosmology, women and children are meant to understand that masquerades are not human beings but spirits that came from the spirit world. It can be argued that ancient Igbo people instilled fear in the

concept of masquerades, but it all enhanced the reverence that masquerades enjoy (Nwokolo, and Nwanga, 2017).

Again, even though there are uncountable numbers of masquerades in Igbo tradition, there are two types of masquerades. The first is called the visible masquerades. These are the ones that operate during the day time. They are majorly for entertainment, and they engage in dancing, singing, harassing, parodying et cetera. Among them, one finds very beautiful masquerades and even ones that utter wise sayings. The second type of masquerades is the invisible one. This one operates only at night. It makes a horrifying sound; it also instils fear in the community members by restricting their movements at night. It is the masquerade used in the execution of criminals and is always fiercely dressed (Nwokolo, and Nwanga, 2017).

In every culture, there are certain ideas explicit in the interaction of different elements which in turn sometimes act as an instrument of social control with which different cultural segments are held together. Thus, prior to the spread of Islamic and Christian influences, most societies in Africa believed in a complex structure of spirits and ancestors who influenced the living. This was contained in the traditional belief, which reflects the wholeness of the universe. As far as the people are concerned, they 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 (Akintayo, 2008).

Masquerades symbolize 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. Little wonder the masquerade cult is still closely linked with paganism even in this contemporary era. It celebrates a period when the dead interact with the living, as it is their responsibility to compel the living to uphold the ethical standards of past generations.

Theology of Resurrection

This Christian theology in the resurrection of the body is rooted in the stories contained in their spiritual book concerning the resurrection of their master and proponent Christian religion; Jesus Christ. The stories have it that Jesus Christ was arrested by the Roman empire and was subsequently killed by way of crucifixion on the cross at Calvary in a place popularly referred to as Golgotha. It was recorded that he resurrected after three days. More interesting is that he prophesied about his resurrection prior to its occurrence. Upon his appearance to his followers, his followers began to spread the information about his resurrection from one place to another; though the Roman authority disputed the information as being distorted information, saying that followers came by night and stole the body of their master (McGrath, 2001).

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Based on the theological teachings and beliefs, the resurrection of the body is one of the predominant or paramount teachings and beliefs of Christian theology. The Christians believe when a person dies, irrespective of how the body is buried and laid, there are tendencies that the person will come back to life during the resurrection of the dead by their saviour, Jesus Christ (Ordia, and Ukeni, 2016).

Amongst the Christian faith and theology, diverse clustering issues are surrounding the theology of resurrection. Some have asked, how would the resurrection occur? What age would the person be resurrected? Assuming the person was maimed before his death, would he be so maimed or fully bodied? Would the people who are resurrected be restored to their families? Will there be parity of gender? What of those who were not buried but were burnt to ashes or those whose bodies were eaten by carnivorous animals or whose bodies crushed in accidents or who prior to their death gift their body parts for experimentation and charities? These questions are critical issues bedevilling the theology of resurrection in the Christendom (Ordia, and Ukeni, 2016); however, they are parts of issues to be considered in this paper.

In the next part of this paper, the researcher will attempt to juxtapose both concepts of masquerading in the Igbo social milieu and the theology of resurrection, identifying the similarities and differences if any.

Analysis of Masquerading in Igbo Social Milieu and Theology of resurrection

About masquerading in the Igbo social milieu; the most fundamental attribute of masquerading in the social milieu which distinguishes it with the practice of masquerading in other cultures, most significantly, the western cultures is the belief that masquerading is a form of interaction between the living and the death. The Igbos believe that with the practice and cultural heritage of masquerading, the living honours the dead ancestors (Nwokolo, and Nwanga, 2017).

Amongst the Igbos, there is a rich belief that the dead ones are not wholly dead or eternally dead. On that premise, the Igbos believe that the dead ones can be invoked and brought to the land of the living through the rites and rituals of masquerading (Onyeneke, 1987). This is directly in line and same accord with the theology of

resurrection where the Christians believe that a person who is dead is not wholly dead or eternally. The Christian theology likens a dead person to someone who is sleeping, who is to be woken during resurrection (White, 2014).

The Christian theology of resurrection is of the view that the sleeping dead shall be resurrected, those who did good in their lifetime to eternal life and those who did evil to eternal condemnation (McGrath, 2001). In the Igbo masquerade belief and culture, the Igbos believe that it is not all ancestral spirit that can be invoked during masquerading. In the belief and cultural system of the Igbos, only the ancestors who lived a worthy life are worthy of being invoked to come and spend some time in the land of the living. The ancestors, who are notoriously evil and worked against the will of the gods and the people, cannot be invoked (Anyebe, 2006). In this vein, it could be said that those ancestors who cannot be invoked during masquerading because of their evil deeds are in the same category with the ones whom the Christians deemed in their theology of resurrection to be bound for eternal condemnation.

Masquerading in the Igbo social milieu is not an all-comers affair. This is to say that it is not for all to witness the invocation of the ancestral spirit into the land of the living or their return into the land of the spirits. When invocation is to be done, only purified men who have been initiated into the traditional cult after series of sacrifice, rituals and rites are allowed to participate in the invocation. The Igbos believe that anyone aside these who witnessed the invocation shall be struck to death (Anyebe, 2006). The Christian theology of resurrection is propelled in a manner to say that only the righteous people who are alive shall entirely witness the resurrection, the evil sinners who are alive upon witnessing the resurrection shall be struck to condemnation (White, 2014). This is highly in line with the Igbo adage that says “O bu onye aka ya di ocha n’ afu chukwu ” (Only a person who has clean hands ‘righteous’ will see the gods ‘God’) (Azenabor, 2002).

The teachings and folktales about masquerading is used as a form of moral lessons for the living, imploring them to live a worthy life when they are still alive, to have the opportunity to return to the land of the living to commune with the people who are dwelling in the land of the living (Internet). The Christians also use the teachings about the theology of resurrection to persuade the living to exhibit godliness in the lifestyles to partake in the resurrection into eternal life. Observation has that this theology is one of the greatest compelling consolations to Christians (Lim,&Putnam, 2010).

An essential dimension of the theology of resurrection is the events of transfiguration in the holy book of the Christians (McGrath, 2001). Note that before the event of transfiguration, the two persons who are stated to have appeared at the event were no longer living in the land of the living, their existence was in another realm, Perhaps, land of the spirit or dead (Ala ndi Mmuo). The two of them were deemed as the patriarchs who the Igbos would liken to be the ancestors (Ndiichie). The spirits of Elijah and Moses, were invoked by the Master of Christianity (Jesus Christ) which brought the duo from the land of the spirits into the land of the living to commune with the living and interact accordingly. Likewise, the act of masquerading in the Igbo social milieu invokes ancestral spirits of the ancestors who are no longer in the land of the living, whose existence could be fitted with the same realm wherein those of the duo were invoked during transfiguration came from. Just like the duo appeared and had short while in the land of the living, the practice of masquerading brings the ancestors back to the land of the living for them to have a short while too, in the land of the living (Internet).

The theology of resurrection wholly specified the rites and rituals involved in the resurrection which involves but not limited to a call of the dead ones with the voice of the archangel, and also a trumpet sound which would precede the resurrection (White, 2014). The masquerading in the Igbo social milieu is characterized by lots of rituals and rites, which will herald the resurrection and invocation of the ancestral spirits in forms of masquerades. These rituals also include a call in a voice which may be likened to that of the theological archangel. The voice that calls in the Igbo social milieu is often that of the oldest man in the community or the spokesperson of the gods (dibia) (Nwokolo, and Nwanga, 2017). The rituals are performed harmoniously and the form of ritual to be performed depends on what the ancestral spirits are being invoked for. This is because there are many purposes which the ancestral spirits invoked in the form of masquerades are meant to serve (Akintayo, 2008).

Conclusion

Igbo social milieu in its original traditional settings is no longer as vivid and valid as it ought to be. This may be associated with the influx of cultures and social leanings which came into the Igbo geographical area as a result of western acculturation and colonialism. It could be said that the belief in the effectiveness and sacredness of the masquerading cultural heritage has weighed down to compare its status in the period or era prior to the western infiltration of the traditions, customs and cultures of the Igbo people. The majority of the masquerades seen along the streets of the Igbo communities today are not traditionally linked to deities, neither are they a true invocation of the ancestral spirit to come and live awhile amongst the living.

What is seen in the Igbo communities today in the name of masquerading are mostly youths who cloak themselves with rags, torn clothes and well-sewn pieces of clothing, with fixed palm fronts, colour variations, and a mask for a cover-up. Usually, the youths who impersonate the masquerades are even known amongst the

people; thus, the credence and value which the practice of masquerading has and its likeliness to the theology of resurrection is faulted herein since the persons who appear as masquerades are persons who are known to the living in a known place amongst the living. Often, the persons are seen putting on the apparel and when they remove or pull it off.

The masquerading in the Igbo communities could be said to have lost its ancestral flavours and heritage of the spirits which makes it similar or comparable to the theology of resurrection. These days, the masquerading practice is used as a means of begging money and extorting people of their money. Observations show that on one occasion of masquerading in Abia state, Nigeria, the person who impersonates the masquerade noticed that the unmasked accomplices are stuffing money elsewhere outside their main money bag; he pulled off his mask and ensue a fight with them. The fight was so brutal that led to the police arresting all the masquerades. As regards the original concept of masquerades, those were not masquerades in the Igbo social milieu; they may be masquerades in the westernized Igbo social milieu. Consequently, the sacredness and secrecy that surround the cult of masquerades are no where to be found in the modern day masquerade cult.

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