

Free Speech as an Indigenous Practice in Pre-Colonial Nigerian Communities: the Igala Abule Night Mask Example

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Abstract

Before their contact with the Western world, a number of pre-colonial Nigerian societies had developed practices adjudged by modern pundits as civilised. These included having representative and hierarchical political systems, fair justice system, indigenous technical knowledge (ITK), and effective communication modes. This paper relied on historical research method to contend and establish that freedom of expression was an indigenous Nigerian practice, as epitomised by the activities of Abule Night Mask of the Igala people of North-Central Nigeria. It also simulated the Night Mask's activities to modern mass media practice. The Night Mask served as a moral check on the excesses of members of the society. Its dramatised execution of this function, using insults and other verbal attacks on erring individuals, added to its entertaining richness to the community. By this, Abule was an organ for not just moral correction and social commentary, but also of information dissemination and entertainment - a simulation of the contemporary mass media. The much celebrated "free speech" may not, after all, be new to the Nigerian society.

Keywords: Abule, Night Mask, Igala, freedom of expression

1.0 Introduction

Many researches on the socio-cultural narratives of African societies suggest that a lot of 'enlightened' practices were mainly brought to the continent through her contact with external entities. In contrast, other works would argue that a good number of such "civilised" practices were, in fact, *indigenous*. Proponents of this view argue that most traditional African systems recognised and affirmed the rights to life and freedom of expression. These rights reflect communitarian values indigenous to African cultures. It is important to stress that these rights were first and foremost derived from duties and seen as such. African societies, which were built on and defined by collective expression, kinship, and family, provided the pivot point or framework in which members of the society asserted their rights and discharged their responsibilities. The Igala Abule Night Mask can therefore be seen and understood from this perspective.

Within the pre-colonial geographical entity presently defined as Nigeria, some of her societies developed forms of organised political systems such as: the hierarchical system of the Hausa Kingdoms (Adamu, 1978), the representative political leadership among the Igbos (Afigbo, 1980), and the checks and balances on Oyo and Bini Obas, with offices of prime ministers (Akinjogbin, 1980 & Hodgkin, 1975). Gender wise, the place of women was also recognised as may be aptly seen in the cases of Queen Amina of Zazzau (Afolalu, 1971 & Mahdi, 1978) and the Queen Mother Idia of Bini Kingdom (Ebeigbe, 2013), whom, each enjoyed the loyalties and

support of powerful men within their domains. These, among several other examples, were practices that promoted some degree of gender equity and social justice in typical African societies prior to colonisation (and its cousins), that forever altered the original ways of life of different peoples.

Narrowing this discourse further, some pre-colonial Nigerian communities recognised and regarded highly the significance of freedom of expression in what Shaw (2009) described as African Model of Journalism. This model employed the use of oral tradition to construct reality in social context. “The way reality was constructed and presented by bards, story tellers (griots) and village historians in oral narrative was then the way people experienced existentially the events and persons depicted in stories” (ibid, 2009:6). Freedom of expression, a tenet of modern journalism, was a practice in the traditional Nigerian society. It played a vital role in keeping members of the society within acceptable moral limits due to the social commentaries that greeted any misconduct. In some cases, such checks were carried out by anonymous entities (like masquerades) and social institutions (like secret societies), who, were usually revered for possessing mystical powers (Mathias, 2014). In Africa, individual dignities and honour flowed from the transcendental roles such individuals played as cultural beings and not something or some espoused philosophy of human dignity that derives from something mystical or natural (Sargent, 1988; Ozochi, 2011; & Ugwu, 2007).

Apart from providing some entertainments during festivals and ceremonies, the Abule Night Mask, like similar others in Nigeria, performed other significant functions for the society as social arbiters, and effecting some checks on erring members of the society. They publicly exposed misconduct and in extreme cases, poured verbal insults on culprits, calling them by their names for members of the community to know who they were. Amali (1992:58-59) revealed that in Iboland, Idomaland, and in Yourbaland of Nigeria, masked dancers were used to correct social anomaly:

In Nsukka [D]ivision of Iboland...masked dancers, purporting to represent spirit cult, Omabe were employed by the council of elders whenever there was difficulty in enforcing law and order....The practice of Ogblo night drama or rural recreational society...is a well-known phenomenon in most Idoma communities. Ogblo is a sacred society which oversees all human and natural activities in the land. Its primary objective is to insult, expose, and publicly ridicule social ills....In Yoruba...during the Egungun festival at Okemesi, the Atikpa, a nocturnal Egungun who indulges in tell-tales, is also remarkable for “portrait caricature” that is deliberate distortion of mannerism of certain individuals he used as target.

In addition to satire, these maskers literarily chastised offenders both physically and psychologically by rebuking them, calling out their names, warning, and cursing them (Onunwa, 1990:29):

Offenders of public morality (thieves, adulterers, witches) are mercilessly beaten or flogged by masquerades. The maskers of these secret clubs are used to enforce the ruling or decisions of the council of elders of the village by the way they displayed uncontrolled power....

With these backgrounds therefore, this essay used the Igala people’s Abule Night Mask as an eloquent demonstration and an instrument through which the established traditional democratic practice of freedom of expression was made manifest. The essay extracted elements of freedom of expression embedded in the activities of the Night Mask before Nigeria’s colonisation and the modern era in order to amplify the notion that the practice is not entirely alien to the typical Nigerian society. Free speech is indeed a known issue in these climes.

2.0 Problem

When the Nigerian political system democratised the process of information dissemination in 1992 and in 2011 (Aminu et al, 2011), drums were rolled out to herald and salute the “great feat” as if the feat did not already exist before now. Pro-modernisation pundits widely documented that freedom of expression is predominantly a *Western* idea and that African societies generally had none of it before their contact with the West. This lopsided

conclusion antagonises and unjustly robs African societies of the element of free speech that accounts for one of the ways in which they observed some measure of civility. Contending this stunted and jaundiced construction, with a particular bias for Igala's Abule, is problematised in this essay.

3.0 Objective

This paper contends that the existence of freedom of expression is as old as the Nigerian society and that it is more democratic for the media to be available for all and not a commodity to be purchased by those who can afford it. Many Nigerian societies practiced established freedom of expression in dynamic and theatrical forms using dramatic personae as agents of the practice. Succinctly, the paper aims to:

- i. Establish that, indeed, freedom of expression has always been an indigenous Nigerian practice long before the arrival of the colonial masters; and
- ii. Simulate the functions of the Abule Night Mask with those of modern day mass media in checking the excesses of members of society.

4.0 Literature Review

4.1 Igala People of Nigeria

The Igala people are believed to share a proto-Kwa ancestry with modern Yoruba and Igbo of South-western and South-eastern parts of Nigeria respectively (Akinkugbe, 1976). This, would also include other peoples like the Nupe, Idoma, Bini and Itsekiri, thus making them one of the "major-minority" ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. Geographically, the Igalas are situated east of the River Niger and the Benue Confluence of Kogi State of Nigeria (Ojonemi & Ojonimi, 2015). Also, Adukwu & Ocholi (2014) and Egbolimajon (1996) acknowledged that Igala Kingdom remains one of the rare kingdoms that is blessed with abundant natural and human resources in Africa. Their cultural and political centres are located in Idah, a predominantly fishing community, where the traditional stool and the symbol of the Igala nation, the "Attah Igala" is domicile (Usman, 2015). "Attah" means father, hence the "Father of Igala". Apart from Idah's mainstay as a fishing community, other Igala settlements are predominantly engaged in cropping and timber plantation (Miachi, 2010).

As a result of the strategic location of the Igala people, they were exposed to a wide range of cultural and linguistic influences from other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Notable among them are the Idoma, Igbo, Yoruba, and Bini ethnic nationalities (Boston, 1968). For example, Akinkugbe (1976) noted that Igala and Yoruba have significant historical and cultural relationships. The Igala language is closely related to Yoruba and Itsekiri languages. Igalas are polytheists. The modern day Igalas practice Islam, Christianity, and traditional worship. In terms of numbers, the 2006 Nigeria's national census puts the Igala population at about four million (National Population Commission, 2006). Majority live in present day Kogi State with others overflowing into Anambra, Edo, Delta, Abuja, Lagos, Kano, Kaduna, and Enugu (Okakachi, 2011; & Miachi, 2010).

4.2 The Abule Night Mask

For a society to live up to its status as one, certain conditions must be satisfied. These conditions or needs relate to its mode of communication between its members, cultural, and political institutions. These conditions, notwithstanding the crux of this essay in a contemporary setting, predate Johannes Gutenberg's press and Samuel Morse's electronic audio inventions (Dominick, 2002). For example, sentinels in primitive tribes scanned their environments for dangers; councils of elders made decisions based on their interpretations of facts; and decisions were transmitted further down to other members of the tribe. Similarly, entertainment and amusements were provided by jesters and storytellers. "As society became larger and more complex, these jobs grew too big to be handled by single individuals....Troubadours, storytellers, court jesters...fulfilled...the function before the media." (ibid, 2002:33 & 43). The import of these typify pre-modern societies' indigenously developed modes of communication, predating their exposure to external civilisations and influences. Marshall McLuhan, in his Media Ecology treatise, *Map of Mass Media History*, called it the Acoustic Era, where the basis

for all communication was sound-oriented, whether it was in generation, content, or reception (Griffin, 2012). The Abule Night Mask operated at a significantly acoustic level in carrying out its functions.

The Abule Night Mask of Igalaland is a rich cultural heritage that may not have been adequately interrogated or documented. From oral accounts passed down from one generation to another, the Igala Abule is a society that has existed from pre-colonial times. Adama (2013) described it as a noisemaking social masquerade which provided entertainment, and was believed to be omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. Abule operated at nights when some bad things might have been committed in the community. “Abule acts without fear or favour. They are known to expose people through proverbial statements and songs” (ibid, 2013:182), and they wielded absolute power over the community (Amade & Atule, 2009).

In piecing this essay together, vital oral accounts were collected from a number of sources to draw corroboration. The sources, who were carefully selected, are individuals who had lived most of their lives in the villages, where, they were exposed to lots of oral tradition of Igala history and culture. They belong to both the older and younger generations. According to Ibrahim Shuaibu, one of the sources, colonisation and modernisation dwindled the activities and popularity of the Night Mask. These were as a result of proscription of some cultural practices by colonial authorities (Ameh Oboni cited in Punch, 2017), and the eroding influence of westernisation on indigenous lifestyles and ways.

4.3 Theoretical Leanings

4.3.1 Libertarian Theory

One of the theories relevant to this paper is the Libertarian Media Theory. It is a theory that emphasises the freedom of expression without restriction. It gave birth to the “self-right process of the free market place of ideas (Folarin, 2012), which connotes that good ideas would always outwit and outlive bad ones in an environment where freedom of expression is guaranteed.

Libertarian Theory evolved in the 17th Century and was christened *Free Press Theory* (McQuail, 1987). The theory posits that human beings are inclined to seek truth and be guided by it (Anaeto et al, 2012). They are presumed to be able to discern for themselves between truth and falsehood, and with their hitherto exposure to a thriving press as a free marketplace of ideas and information, they are able to drive public policy (Daramola, 2003). Anaeto et al (2012) provides some core assumptions of the theory to include the following:

- a. Publications should be devoid of prior censorship;
- b. There should be no compulsion to anything;
- c. Publication of error is protected equally with that of truth in matters of opinion and belief;
- d. There should be no restriction on the collection of information for publication provided it is done by legal means;
- e. No restriction should be placed on the export or import or sending of messages across national frontiers; and
- f. Journalists should be allowed to claim a reasonable degree of autonomy in their place of work.

Arguably, the theory is not indigenous to Africa, much less to Igalaland, in how it was propounded. However, its assumptions describe the activities of Abule performers/dramatic personae. The theory finds relevance in the biting satire of Abule’s verbal messages. The society within which Abule operated neither saw its activities as a nuisance nor a harassment to its members, except to people who had morally and socially derailed. The messages were usually truthful and they targeted deviants who needed to eschew certain tendencies. Abule

performers/dramatic personae were expected to be people with impeccable character and sound moral standing. They were considered those who desired the best for the community through spiritual and physical harmony (Adama, 2013). The ethics forbade them from utilising masks for vendetta or blackmailing people who were innocent. There were certain oaths and requirement that the dramatic personae had to satisfy to effectively be useful to the society. One of such was the requirement of confirming and establishing facts before airing such. The Abule Night Mask was the last resort and not first warning. In one way or the other, the deviant would have been notified and warned previously. These steps were to put such on notice that his/her behaviour was anti the peace, prosperity and harmony of the community (Onunwa, 1990). The Igala Abule, like other ancient Nigerian secret societies, believed in the harmonious maintenance and servicing of relationships between the two realms and believed that the bridging of the moral code by a single member of the society could attract severe sanction for the entire society, etc.

4.3.2 Social Responsibility Theory

A book titled *Four Theories of the Press* was published in 1956, and it re-examined the libertarian and authoritarian philosophies of the press. One of the results of the re-examination was the Social Responsibility Theory (Hasan, 2013). Following the failure of the *free marketplace of ideas* that characterised the Libertarian Theory, an American initiative in the 1940s birthed the social responsibility philosophy.

This theory, also referred to as the *Western Concept*, provided a model in which the mass media had certain obligations to the society (ibid, 2013), expressed in words such as *informative, truth, accuracy, objectivity, and balance*. The goal of the social responsibility system is that the media as a whole is pluralised, indicating a reflection of the diversity of society as well as access to various points of view (Siebert, 1963 cited in Anaeto et al, 2012). Dominick (2013:310) described the incorporation of the part of libertarianism into social responsibility philosophy but with the introduction of new elements as well.

This approach holds that the press has a right to criticise government and other institutions, but it also has a responsibility to preserve democracy by properly informing the public and by responding to society's needs and interests. The press does not have the freedom to do whatever it pleases; it has certain obligations to society.

Unlike the Libertarian Theory, the social responsibility principle is to provide an entrance to different mass media to minority groups. The journalist is accountable to his audience, as well as to the government (Hasan, 2013). Social Responsibility Theory is an extension of the Libertarian Theory in that the press recognises its responsibility to the society to carry out its essential functions. Ojobor (2002) highlights the main principles of the theory according to McQuail (1987) as follows:

- a. The media should accept and fulfil certain obligations to society;
- b. That through professionalism and informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity, and balance, these obligations can be met;
- c. That media should regulate itself within the framework of law and established institutions to be able to carry out its responsibilities;
- d. That whatever leads to crime, violence, civil disorder, or offence to minority groups should be avoided by the media;
- e. That the media should reflect its society's plurality, giving access to various points of view and granting all right to reply; and
- f. That the society has the right to expect high standards of performance from the media.

The Abule Night Mask saw itself as performing acts of social responsibility to its community by checking unacceptable conduct by members of the same community. This is in similitude to what the modern media do in checking the excesses of both individuals and institutions in the society (Okenwa, 2002 & McQuail, 1987). The contemporary mass media believe in purging the society of social ills, encouraging and leading people to do things rightly, whilst informing and mobilising them. The media also expose activities that are questionable and unbecoming of decency and acceptable norms. Abule, in comparison, upheld similar tenets, carrying out investigations before verbally going ballistic on their erring targets.

5.0 Abule's Mode of Operation: Exercise of Free Speech

The Abule Night Mask operated near bushes close to human settlements, where their activities could be heard by members of the community. They were only heard but never seen, with their activities carried out under the cover of night (Adama, 2013). It was radical in its approach and fearless in its commentaries. The Night Mask usually was made up of more than an individual, since there was a drummer, a jester and one who delivered the messages.

The whole process begins with loud drum beats, chants, strange shouts, and jests, which most often took members of the community unawares, according to an account by Ogwu Idakwo, a native of Ojuwo-Ocha in Igala land. (This source has lived all of his life in Igalaland and was exposed to the older generation of elders who have rich information on Igala history). As much as these sounds emanated from the bushes, the particular direction where they came from was hardly known. At some other times, the direction of the source of the voices alternates from one point to the other, but with the voices remaining the same. Also difficult to identify were the voices of members of the Night Mask, to know which members of the community they were. This was because, according to Ibrahim Shuaibu, their voices were modulated in such a way that members of the community could not match them with those of any particular individuals they knew. In addition, utterances were made in fearsome tones that women especially, hid themselves indoors. Women were forbidden from coming out at such nights because of the mysticism attached to the Mask's activities.

Issues addressed by Abule ranged from stealing, wickedness, open defecation by unknown persons, nagging by women, and any other vices that were unacceptable to the community (an oral account by Joseph Okpanachi, an Igala elder). Other functions Abule performed included watching over public utilities like markets, streams, rivers, plantations, etc. which were kept under their care (Adama, 2013). Even members of the ruling class were not spared. Acts of highhandedness, wickedness, and unfair judgements by the king attracted unsavoury commentaries. From an interview with Idris Amali, an authority in Traditional African Oral Literature and Proverbs, these verbal missiles did not only target the act committed, but the persons of the defaulters as well. The individuals were rubbished and ridiculed using distasteful adjectives, metaphors, rich imagery, exclamations, descriptive elements, repetitions, and accompanied by satirical songs. Consequently, even the royalty were critical of Abule. The high and mighty dreaded them, not because they passed any judgements but because they used words to verbally strip offenders naked before the world. The acts committed were not necessarily uncommon crimes, but the manner in which Abule cast the offenders was what seemed unusual.

From the above, it could be deduced that Abule's verbal renderings served dual functions. While on the one hand they were a practical *nightmare* to defaulters, exposing their secret evil acts, on the other hand they were a source of entertainment and amusement to other members of the community, evoking great laughter. In other words, they were a nightly comic drama to non-defaulters in the community. Hence by these, they informed, exposed, corrected, checkmated, and entertained, all at the same time.

The activities of Abule were limited to just hot verbal expressions. They did not take the laws into their hands nor punished erring persons. This is very instructive as their only weapons were spoken words. They were only social commentators who used their influence to sanitise the community of social ills. This conforms in some way to Shaw (2009:5) African Model of Journalism:

... [T]here was a form of journalism as it where (sic) in Africa before the advent of colonialism. Journalism then took the form of oral discourse using communication norms informed by oral tradition and folk culture with communal story-tellers (griots), musicians, poets and dancers playing the role of the modern-day journalist.

6.0 Simulating Abule's Activities with Contemporary Freedom of Expression by the Media

From the foregoing, the Abule Night Mask, just like any other indigenous institution, performed very important functions in the society. They were didactical (taught moral lessons) and kept the society on a proper moral compass because they had the freedom to express what they observed. The contemporary mass media operate in a similar manner. The modern mass media's functions of informing, educating, checkmating the excesses of powerful people (and the ordinary people too), thrive on the tenets of freedom of expression. As watchdogs of the society, the media keep public office holders and leaders at all levels on their toes and make them accountable for their actions or misconducts through their (media) surveillance function (Dominick, 2002). The Abule Night Mask made other persons' businesses and the community's business their own business, much in the same way the contemporary mass media do. Abule Night Mask engaged in some form of investigation and digging-up of hidden facts about their targets. Today's media practice employs investigative journalism to dig out hidden information for the public's consumption.

Perhaps also, the masking in the bushes and under the cover of night simulates the modern mass media's non-disclosure of sources and confidentiality. Non-disclosure of source(s) identity is an ingredient of free press. In most countries where the freedom of information legislation is in effect, the law guarantees the safety, non-disclosure and protection of source(s) if otherwise they could be vulnerable to harm.

The Abule Night Mask enjoyed a great degree of independence from undue interference. They could neither be influenced nor intimidated by even the high and mighty. The drumming that breaks the silence of the night sends jitters down the spines of members of the community, as nobody could tell whose secret sins were about to be blown open before the public. In the same way, the media of today, *ideally, is presumed* to be independent of undue interference and influence from the high and mighty in the discharge of their functions.

7.0 Recommendations

The paper proffers the following recommendations:

- i. Preservation of our tangible and intangible historical materials. A challenge the essay suffered was the dearth of original documented data about the Abule Night Mask. The reliance on oral tradition is not the best for a research on a rich cultural practice that has relevance to today's media world. As if it was not bad already, Nigeria's education policymakers saw nothing wrong in expunging History as a subject from both the primary and secondary curricula in the 21st Century. It was replaced with subjects like Civic Education and Entrepreneurial Studies. This is a misnomer. No super power that we aspire to be like, swept the teaching and learning of their histories to the trash bins. Their technological, economic, and military successes have been proven severally to be hinged on the preservation of their cultural heritages. In addition to teaching their children their own histories, they taught them other peoples' histories. For the sake of the Nigerian younger generation, who are largely adjudged to be ignorant of their cultural histories, such unreasonable policies should never be considered.
- ii. Collection of historical information from local communities. Deliberate efforts should be made to collect historical information from our local communities. We may still be fortunate to have some aged people amongst us who have invaluable information they can pass to us for proper documentation.

- iii. Shift in the perception that freedom of expression was imported to Africa. There should be a general change in perception that African societies only knew and practiced a democratised way of information sharing with the coming of colonialists to her shores. Africans had long developed and practiced their own forms of communication which were very effective in meeting their needs (Shaw, 2009). The white imperialists, in fact, employed some African Traditional Communication modes already in place to their own advantage within the colonies. Examples include the use of town-criers, smoke, and drummers to pass messages. They were replete across the continent, especially in British West Africa. Town-criers passed messages to the communities from the colonial authorities in local dialects.

8.0 Conclusion

This paper contended that free speech is indigenous to Nigerian communities before their colonisation by Britain. It was practiced in dynamic and dramatic ways such that they effectively met the needs of the communities. The Igala Abule Night Mask was used as an eloquent example of this practice. Hinging on Libertarian and Social Responsibility theories of the media, the paper simulated Abule's activities with contemporary mass media's functions of surveillance, investigation, information dissemination, correlation, social responsibility, and entertainment. Free speech as an ingredient of a free press was also highlighted in this argument. Abule was mystified as being omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient. Today's media seem to be all-knowing and at everywhere at about the same time. Their ability to access any information on activities in the society seem to get easier by the day. These attributes contribute directly and indirectly to check the excesses of individuals and institutions in the society, hence promoting some social order.

The paper recommended that Nigeria's mass media practitioners should look more inwardly for clues that would promote the correct practice of the freedom of expression. Everything that comes from the West should not be swallowed hook, line, and sinker. Our cultures can serve as mirror and guide for the effective practice of free speech. Media researchers should document those positive elements in our traditions that find relevance in modern media practice. A people who know their history find explanations to present occurrences and are able to map their path into a promising future.

It also recommended that the aged should be better catered for. A significant portion of the information collected for this essay was through oral tradition, passed down from past generations. This is a threat to the survival of indigenous histories that are yet to be codified. If the older generation go to the grave with the rich information they have, a lot of rich data would be lost forever, hence giving validity to the African proverb which says that: *When an old man dies, a library burns to the ground.* To avert this, they should be well cared for in order to preserve their lives and minds for the benefit of posterity.

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Idris O.O Amali (2015). Professor of African Oral Literature in the Department of Theatre and Media Arts, Federal University Lafia.

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