

A woman can become a 'man': Rituals and gender equality among the Nsukka Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Scholars of gender inequality tend to neglect ritual as a mechanism that can aid gender equality – even when it is obvious that rituals are cardinal in bridging the equality gap between genders. Basing its argument on the incarnate being institution among the Igbo, an essentially male-dominated institution, this study explains how rituals empower women to attain equal status with men and help them to participate actively in the institution. Questions to address include how women are admitted into the society, nature and meaning-cum-essence of the rituals. Using oral interviews, participant observation, video clips and photographs of women who underwent rituals, this paper argues that ritual is a potent force in the attainment of gender equality. This paper aims to help elucidate the logic of the rituals and bring to the fore how the intangible heritage of an Igbo society helps bridge the gender inequality gap.

Keywords

rituals, gender equality, incarnate beings, Igbo, Nigeria

Introduction

What is it that modern women want?
Why is it that she has suddenly discovered
that her male partner is incorrigibly malevolent...
(Okoye 1980)

The above quotation by Mokuwugo Okoye is premised on the increasing number of debates on women and the attention they draw. For instance, it is on record that many international conferences have been convened primarily in recognition of the universal plight of women and their potential as untapped human resources that

can aid national development. The four world conferences on women in 1975, 1980, 1985 and 1995; the five African Regional conferences on women in 1977, 1979, 1984 and 1994; and the 1981 convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (Ademola 2003), are prominent cases of women's rights issues taking the centre stage in international discourse. More important is the demand by women in Africa, especially that of Igbo women, to reclaim their positions of power, which colonial rule distorted. Among the Igbo, as in other African societies, the views on gender are rooted in larger overarching structures such as history, social organisation, orality, political organisation and economic status (Sadiqi 2003). Oluwole E. Oni opines that the theory and practice of politics and, by extension, governance in Africa has inadvertently excluded women for several reasons, which, to a great extent, are connected to colonialism, religion, culture and tradition. These structures perceive the exercise of power as a male-exclusive preserve, with women always at the receiving end (Oluwole Oni 2014). Oluwole's view is in sharp contrast with what pertains to Igboland, where V. C. Uchendu observed that the African woman regarded as a chattel of her husband, who has made a bridewealth payment on her account, is not an Igbo woman, who enjoys a high socio-economic and legal status and could even summon her husband to a tribunal, where she will get a fair hearing (Uchendu 1965). Among the Igbo, social interactions are framed around a dynamic interface between family ties; the concept of the self and the distinction between public and private domains in the in- or out- group social relations and gender issues loom large in these indices. In precolonial Igboland, the *Obi* (male monarch) of Onitsha ruled in parley with the *Omu* (female monarch), and later with *Ikporo-Onitsha* after the fall of the *Omu* establishment (Omonubi-McDonnell 2003). The Onitsha example indicates that there was gender complementarity in precolonial Igbo governance. The role of the Umuada in their natal communities in Igboland need not be over emphasised as Chidi M. Amaechi and Obinna U. Muoh have done justice to that (Amaechi and Muoh ,2018).

The structuring of social groups among the Igbo is organised around human and spiritual underpinnings, which can be gleaned from the number of ways in which their culture, tradition and history are preserved, promoted and redefined. Whether the emphasis is on human-to-human relations or that between humans and spirits, rituals play a significant role among the Nsukka Igbo of

Nigeria. The appeal to spiritual forces, which, in most cases, are ritualised, is not limited to healing the sick, but also employed in the social milieu to bridge the social gap between members of a polity and in reducing the barriers to inclusiveness between sexes. This is most evident in the masking tradition in which rituals involved in *ikpo ifu mma* and *ichi Oyima* place women on equal footing with men in the masked spirit institution in some Igbo societies.

Ritual has been defined differently by many scholars, but for this study, Rappaport's definition is most useful and appropriate. Rappaport defines ritual as the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers logically. Ritual entails the establishment of convention, the sealing of social contracts, the construction of integrated conventional orders and the investment of whatever it encodes with morality, the construction of time and eternity, the representation of a paradigm of creation, the generation of the concept of the sacred and the sanctification of conventional order, the generation of theories of the occult, the evocation of numinous experience, the awareness of the divine, the grasp of the holy and the construction of orders of meaning that go beyond the semantic (Stepanek 2014). The rituals involved in the *ikpo ifu mma* and *ichi Oyima* (two titles that involve several rituals taken by women) are tools for enacting a social contract between female members of society that want to be active and unrestricted participants in the masquerade institution and male initiates. David Griffiths observed that

[m]asquerades are regarded as special people in their communities forming a crucial and fundamental link between the past and present generations. Their methods of displaying and presenting their ancestry are handed down with ritualistic care and thoroughness from generation to generation. (Griffiths 1998)

The masquerade institutions that serve as a symbolic representation of the departed progenies of a society are predominantly male, so the *Omabe* masquerades are referred to as 'father'. P. A. Talbot enthused that *mma* is supposed to be the dead returned to earth to assure their families of their safe arrival and happiness in the spirit land. No women are ever allowed to be members (Talbot 1926). In consonance with the Talbot's view, Reverend Augustine Onyeneke avers that

[t]he masquerade serves the special function of differentiating the male and female in Igbo society. Everywhere, it is the exclusive function of the male, while the female[s] are always excluded even where a female character is portrayed in the masking [...] The social definition of man, therefore, is the ability to control a masquerade. (Onyeneke 1987)

Evelyn N. Urama, while writing about *Omabe* in Nsukka, insists that the *Omabe* cult is masculine, even though women who have attained their menopause can occasionally be admitted into the cult (Nwachukwu Urama 2012). Nwando Achebe scripted that the masked spirits or masquerades were the dead who had come back to life in the day-to-day existence of the community and are decidedly a male secret cult that enforce and control the laws and ideals of the community where they operate (Achebe 2011). Drawing from the Lejja community's account of the origin of *Omabe* and *Odo* masquerades, Ugwoke, the father and founder of Lejja, when he was about to exit the physical world, was faced with the challenge of how to share in the spirit world the love he had for his son and that he had for his father. He decided to share the love by alternating his stay between his father and his son and, wherever he might be he assured his son of his fatherly protection always. He was to come back forcefully from the spirit world to stay with his son and would return to the land of forms for a while before returning politely to stay with his son again. The spirit that accompanied Ugwoke on his forceful return was later translated to '*Omabe* masquerade'; the one that came as the polite spirit became the '*Odo* masquerade' (Opata 1997). A practical demonstration of the masquerade institution as the exclusive preserve of men is seen in the first functions performed on the first day of its supposed return from 'the land of forms', which has to do with the veneration of the male ancestors called *ndushi*. In communities like Lejja, these functions were performed through a musical rendition of *egwu orie*, in which the names of the founding father of the community and that of the constituent villages were mentioned.¹ However, even though the names of women are not called, women were represented by spiritual forces and ontological beings: *Ani* (the earth goddess), *Idenyi Ohomu* (female deity associated with wealth creation), *Umuada Oha* (female equivalent of the male council of elders) and *Adada Nwabueze Ezema* (the mother deity) of the community are beckoned. In the three villages of Owerre Lejja (Ejarija, Owerre Ani and Amaobina), the same is observed on the day of the return

of the *Odo* masquerade.² Premised on the notion that the ancestors represented by the *Omabe* masquerades are male, women who participate fully in the institution undergo rituals that empower them to become 'more male than some men'. These rituals grant them the right to enter the grove of the *Omabe* masquerade, enter its house during musical renditions for the masked spirits by the male initiates, own masks, design masquerade costumes and, more importantly, be present when the *Omabe* spirit is dressed and undressed.³ This is anathema in many other Igbo societies.

There are several conflicting accounts of the origin of masquerade and the role and limitations to women's participation among Igbo communities. In Ukana, S. N. Elo records that the origin of the *Odo* could be traced to a point in the history of Ukana when women neglected their obligations to men, because women virtually controlled the social functions in the community and relegated the vital position of men to the background. Uncomfortable with women's domineering stance, the men met in secret and resolved to secretly dig a tunnel that would run from a thick forest to the market square. They accomplished this in two years. From the tunnel, an awful creature emerged. Consequently, there was stampede, but the creature ordered all to be calm, assuring them that his appearance was divinely inspired, because he came to solve their problems – on the condition that men be his mediators (Elo 2007). This account differs from one of the versions of the origin of *Omabe* among the Nsukka people. Onogwu Ikechukwu Obayi, the secretary of the Nsukka Council of Elders (male wing), posits that *Omabe* spiritually came from *Mkpu Ozo* (anthill) and that a woman known as Adada Nwabueze Nweze Eworo saw the spirit of *Omabe* as it came out from *Mkpu Ozo* and spoke to it. The spirit replied by saying 'my name is *Omabe*; go tell the community that I am here' (Ikechukwu Obayi). This account presupposes that women were the first to know *Omabe*.

Suffice to say, the idea of *Omabe* spirit coming from the anthill is metaphorical as the anthill is assumed to be the abode of some highly revered ontological beings among the Nsukka Igbo. This assumption is anchored in the notion that anthills are earthen structures created by termites and an indication that the soil used in erecting such structures is spiritually purified. Connecting *Omabe* with the earth (*eja ala*) or any other earthen structure is evident in one of the praise names given to *Omabe*. Among the Nsukka, the '*Omaba [sic]* masquerade is sometimes

referred to as *ilolo bu n'ani me eja etegi ya*, meaning "the termite that lives underground without being soiled by the earth" (Opata 1998). This view is important in understanding the notion of *Omabe* as a manifestation of departed souls who were buried, but subdued death and hence are celebrated.

Definition of terms

Among the Igbo, masquerades are called various names depending on the dialect of each Igbo group. The Nsukka calls the masquerades, for example, *Muo*, *Mma*, *Omabe* and *Mmanwu*. In the Omambala area, especially among the Iguedo clan, it is referred to as *Mm̄onwu* and *Mm̄o* or *M̄ūo* among most other Igbo groups, including those west of the Niger. In the study area, *Mma*, as Chidi Ugwu observes, is a polysemantic term that may mean, in different contexts, ghost/spirit, deity or masquerade. He observes that the *Omabe* masquerade in Nsukka has this connotation (Ugwu 2011). This must have informed Paul Omeje's submission that masquerades in Igboland imply spirit in a visible form or, simply, put spirits (Omeje 2015); whereas Onyekachi Ugwu is of the view that *Omabe* is a great deity and ancestral spirit (Onyekachi 2011). However, the use of the term 'masquerade' in reference to African incarnate beings diminishes the essence of these beings in African ontology. This must have informed Tom A. Miachi to state that:

In the context of Africa, the term, "masquerade" seems to have been carefreely, and, indeed, carelessly used by Europeans and Americans and those social scientists trained by them, such that the real meanings of the concept they are attempting to portray become elusive and the representative terms assume derogatory and wrong meanings and connotations. (Miachi 2012)

Miachi (2012) further asserts that, central to meanings and mask or masquerade in European thought, are attributes such as playing or dramatising the behavioural and even physical attributes of living people; pretence, disguise and ridicule are therefore significant attributes of the masquerade in Western thought. However, among Africans, as exemplified by the Igbo and Idoma of Nigeria, masquerades are seen as spirits and are construed as functional ancestors that periodically visit the living. Masquerades are vehicles for conveying peoples' prayers, aspirations and hopes for the present and future. It is

believed that the ancestor/masquerade dramaturges play fundamental roles in maintaining the people's well-being, and every precaution is taken to protect them from the predatory hands of strangers (Anyebe 2015). Anyebe adds that masquerade performance in Africa is an aspect of the socio-religious continuum. There is no disguise. There is no pretence (Anyebe 2015).

The terms *Oyima* and *ikpo ifu mma*, as used in Nsukka and Enugu-Ezike Igbo communities respectively, refer to women who, through title-taking and rituals, are initiated and empowered to belong and know the secrets of the *Omabe* masquerade institution as well as enjoy all the rights denied non-initiates – male or female. The *Oyima* and *ikpo ifu mma* titles, as they relate to *Omabe*, strongly help to puncture the erroneous impression that 'women cannot be initiated into *Omabe* because of the unfounded belief that women cannot keep secrets' (Onyishi 2005). Writing on masquerades and masking theatre in Africa, Oyin Ogunba concludes that, in many African cultures, women are not admitted into the secrets of the masking art. Indeed, they are often the target of masking and satirical ridicule, because it is assumed that they live a more poetic life than men, have secret powers and have more spirits than human beings; they are therefore objects of fear and veneration (Ogunba 2005). Writing on the level of women's participation in masquerade in Igboland, Nwando Achebe observed that

[t]he Igbo expectation about the relationship of women to masked spirits is clear. However, they distinguish between categories of male associations with masquerades as well. In Igbo sensibilities, the *umu- mma* [masquerade secret society] is the institution that separates full men [i.e. biological men who have been initiated into the *umu-mma*] from uninitiated men and women. It is forbidden for any individual who is born female [i.e. a biological woman or a gender-transformed or masculinized (wo)man, including female husbands, female fathers, female sons, and, in Ahebi's case, female warrant chiefs and female kings] to control a masked spirit in Igboland. Moreover, it is forbidden for uninitiated biological men to control masked spirits. Biological women [again, including gender-transformed women] and uninitiated biological men were supposed to run away at the sight of a mask; if they claimed knowledge of what was behind the mask – in essence if they claimed that they had seen the mask in its nakedness

– they would have committed an abomination against the mask. (Achebe 2011)

Because this remark by Achebe was made in connection with the *Omabe* masquerade institution, it would be germane to research the rituals of the *Oyima/ikpo ifu mma* that empower women to contravene Achebe's observation of the Lejja, Nsukka and Enugu-Ezike areas of Igboland.

***Oyima/ikpo ifu mma*: Their rituals and logic**

Any researcher of the *Oyima/ikpo ifu mma* *Omabe* masquerade institution is confronted with some questions. These include how the candidates are chosen, what qualifies a woman for such an exalted position and what the rituals attached to the processes of taking the title are. What is certain is that there are variations in criteria set by different communities, even as the indices used to select candidates seem similar. Some communities, however, regard the *Oyima* title holder to be of lower status than the *ikpo ifu mma*. A typical example is Enugu-Ezike, where an *Oyima* title holder is not empowered to be present where the 'naked' masquerades are. The masquerade could stay behind her hut to perform some of its musical renditions; she would cook for the *umu-mma* (male initiates) and hand the food to them through a male initiate, but she would never see them performing, except for when they are out to be seen by all. What is also clear is that there are two types of *Oyima*: the one chosen by humans and sanctioned by the gods of the land and the one chosen by the gods of the land and confirmed through divination. No matter the type, a woman must be married and have a track record of good conduct. Her record is determined by digging into issues such as how many times she has been involved in a quarrel and how many times she was found guilty, whether and how she had been a beacon of hope for the culture of the people, how she had helped the poor and less privileged, and whether she is the type that can keep secrets. She must also be able to manage the cost of taking the title financially.⁴ As for *ikpo ifu mma*, a woman who undergoes the process is entitled to see the 'naked' masquerades, or even own a masquerade. However, in Nsukka, an *Oyima* enjoys the privilege of seeing the 'naked' masquerades. It is the right to see the naked masquerades that render women equal to men in the *Omabe* masquerade institution.

When the candidate is assumed to have met all the qualifications, attention is temporarily shifted to the spiritual realm. Among the Igbo, Nwala observed that there are two ontological realms or orders of existence – namely, the supernatural world or invisible realm (*Ala Nmuo*) and the natural world or visible realm (*Ala Madu*) (Nwala 2010). D. I. Nwoga posits that these realms are planes of spirit and human action and need not be physically separated. Nwoga further argues that it is this non-separation that makes the interaction between the various worlds possible, so spirits and their activities impinge on the realities in the human and physical spheres (Nwoga 1984). In agreement with Nwoga, Opatá insists that, among the Igbo, human beings and spirits cohabit in the same space – either alternately or even simultaneously (Opatá 1998). Given the belief that the forces operating in the spiritual realm are superior to those in the physical and, strictly speaking, human realm, people began the rituals of *Oyima/ikpo ifu mma* title by consulting the spirits.

Consulting the spirits follows definite patterns that depict hierarchy and order. The spirits first consulted were those personal to the aspirant and her husband. The aspirant first seeks protection from her *Chi* (personal god) through the sacrifice of *Egbele* (cock), pounded yam with *egusi* or *ogbono* soup. During the sacrifice at the altar of her *Chi*, she also brings a snuffbox, a kola nut and a small wooden stool on which she sits while offering the sacrifice. She requests her *Chi* to guide and protect her through the various stages involved in the title-taking. As a rule, she is not to invite any person outside of her immediate family to this ritual. However, if people from other households come and partake in the event, it is interpreted to mean that her *Chi* is already building some alliances that could help her actualise her ambition.⁵ After the worship of her *Chi*, she and her husband agree on a date to worship the *Chi* and *Ukwu* (leg) of her husband. On the chosen day, two cocks are used: one for the *Chi* and the other for the *Ukwu*. All the other items used on the day the aspirant worshipped her god are also used. An important point in the second stage is the veneration of the human leg. The man kills one of the cocks and smears his toes with its blood and feathers. While doing this, he beckons all departed ancestors of his lineage to wait for his wife and him at their ancestral meeting house (*Obu Ogwa*). Rationalising the ritual of worshipping the leg, Ugwoke Nwiyi posits that the essence is to inform the husband that he will be involved in several trips – involving meeting with many groups and spirit forces – before his wife consummates



Plate 1
Oyima Celestina Ezema with kola nuts and praying before the Omabe Chief Priest.
(Photo by Christian Opata, 2012)

the title. Because vehicles were unknown in traditional settings, this ritual was like servicing the vehicle (the leg of her husband) through spiritual fortification.⁶

The next event involves the aspirant informing members of her husband's lineage (*Umunna*) of her intention. It is the duty of her husband, however, to meet the elders to set a date; in most cases, this date is the one agreed upon by the aspirant and her husband on the day of *igo Chin'ukwu*. The husband goes to the house of the eldest male (*Onyishi*) of his lineage with at least four big lumps of kola nut to inform him of the intention of one of his (*Onyishi*'s) wives, because it is assumed that the eldest man of the lineage is, metaphorically speaking, the husband of all the women married in his lineage, because he is the representative of the ancestors of the lineage and must be informed of any event concerning any of their 'wives' before any other person – save the actual husband of the women involved. From the kola nuts, the *Onyishi* sends one to the man who is responsible for sending some of the paraphernalia of the lineage Omabe to the spirit world (*Onye n'edu mma* or *Ogbanukwu Omabe*) on the day of its departure (*ula mma*). On receiving the kola nut, *Onye n'edu mma* uses the kola nut to meet a diviner from whom he seeks to know if the Omabe spirit approves of the aspirant's intention. The verdict of the Omabe spirit as revealed by the diviner is kept secret by *Onye n'edu mma* until the day the husband meets with his lineage members. As a rule, there must be a gap of eight days between the day the kola nut was taken to the elders' house and the date of the meeting to give room for spiritual investigations.

On the day of the meeting with members of her husband's lineage, the woman cooks cowpea (*Okpa*), which is served to the attendees. Her husband provides them with kola nut, two gallons of palm wine (in the olden days, it was a big calabash of palm wine, which is called *obelle akpacha*, and could contain an equivalent of the liquid contents of 10 to 12 bottles of Star beer) and a snuffbox. Before deliberation begins, the eldest man or his designee orders a younger person to break one of the kola nuts. From the broken kola nut, the *Onyishi* chooses one lobe that must be male, holds it in his right hand and says prayers. While praying, he invokes the spirit of the ancestors of the lineage. After praying, he orders the *Onyishi Omabe* to take one lobe, which must also be male, before the rest is shared among those present. The *Ogbanukwu Omabe* utilises the kola nut given to him to offer special prayers to the spirit of the ancestors; then, he goes outside the assembly hall where, watched by all, he throws up the lobe of the kola nut he used in his prayer. All watch to know how the lobe will fall. If it falls down with the lines facing the sky, it is regarded as a good omen; if the lines are facing the ground, it is regarded as a bad omen and connotes danger, which must be cleared through further divinations before any other steps are taken. However, in most cases, the sign seen is that of a good omen.⁷ When he goes back to the hall, the *Onyishi* orders the *Ogaa* (sharer) or *Eri* (messenger) to share the palm wine. On lifting the wine container, the sharer first pours some into the lineage *mpi atu* (buffalo horn) and hands the buffalo horn to the *Onyishi*, who pours it all away as libation to the ancestors. The same horn is filled and handed to the *Ogbanukwu Omabe*, who also pours some away and hands the remainder to the *Oyima/ikpo ifu mma* aspirant to drink some and hand the remainder back to him.

The Igbo believe that spirits are in charge of a number of the activities that occur in life, but some men are specially endowed with the understanding of this operation and can influence, prevent or suspend the powers of these spirits as occasion demands (Mulumba Ibeabuchi 2013). The rationale for the use of the buffalo horn to give palm wine to the aspirant is because they believe in the power of the buffalo. Woodcott notes that those who have buffalo as a power animal must walk a sacred path, honouring every walk of life. Buffalo is assumed to assist in establishing a deep connection with Mother Earth and Father Sky. Buffalo is also believed to bestow one with strength of character and a free, independent spirit (Woodcott).

Implicit in this aspect of the ritual is the attempt to connect the candidate with celestial bodies, earthly beings and the community's ontological forces at large. At the end of the meeting in the lineage house, the aspirant, her husband and the *Ogbanukwu Omabe* go to the private residence of the *Onyishi*.

Upon arriving at the house of the *Onyishi*, they choose a date on which all the members of the village elders can feast. On the agreed date (which must be on an *orie* market day), the candidate, through her husband, presents the elders of her husband's village with seven gallons of palm wine, many lumps of kola nut, a billy goat, pounded yam, enough soup for everyone present and a big snuffbox filled to the brim with snuff. The husband of the candidate hands everything to the eldest man of his lineage, who then hands them to *Ogbanukwu Omabe* to present to the village elders. The protocol observed in the presentation is vital. It shows the level of consensus reached internally between the aspirant and her lineage members before being presented to the entire village; this confirms that consensus-building is a vital element in the rituals of title-taking among the Igbo, as epitomised by the positions of the people involved in the presentation of the items to the village. Once these conditions are met, the elders take their turn to perform their rituals, accompanied by the aspirant.

All the items brought by the aspirants are taken by the elders of the village to the *Omabe* shrine. The oldest man in the village says prayers on behalf of the candidate and pleads with the *Omabe* spirit to accept her as one of its members. The goat is slaughtered and the blood flows freely on to the ground. Food and drinks are offered to *Omabe* before merriment begins. Part of the blood of the slaughtered goat mixed with sand is collected by the officiating priest and used to smear the forehead of the aspirant as a sign of initiation.⁸ However, the initiation is incomplete, because the candidate has yet to obtain the authorisation of the town's council of elders and other ontological forces that serve as the community's territorial angels.

At the community level, the aspirant is to present the chief priest of the masquerade of the community with a cock, one billy goat or ram, a gourd of palm wine and many kola nuts. The number of kola nuts, as well as the choice of either ram or billy goat, depended on the community's law. With these items, the chief priest took the aspirant

to the central groove of the community. However, even in the absence of these items, the ritual could still continue, because the overall chief priest is assumed to be superior to all of the required items. As a rule, however, the chief priest from the village of the aspirant must be present. While inside the grove, they made some incantations to invoke the *Omabe* spirit. After the invocation, they broke one kola nut, poured palm wine into a buffalo horn and the community's chief priest would hold both items with his right hand after he had inserted one lobe of the broken kola nut into the buffalo horn. The chief priest spilled part of the contents of the buffalo horn onto the altar, making sure that the lobe of the kola nut fell off the horn. The remaining wine was given to the aspirant to drink. If, in the process of drinking the wine, predatory bird(s) flew or hovered around the grove, it was assumed that the candidature of the aspirant was eagerly awaited by the community; however, the absence of a predatory bird did not depict rejection. Then, the billy goat was slaughtered and the blood spread profusely on the altar of the *Omabe* spirit. The head of the slaughtered goat was severed from the body and was passed over the head of the initiate four times amid incantations by the chief priest. The severing of the head of the billy goat and passing it over the head of the aspirant four times was a sign that the candidate has got to a point where she cannot change her mind again. Also using 'the head of a male animal to run over the head of a woman connotes transformation for the woman concerned; she is now a man but a man with no testicles'.⁹ The implication for gender equality as it concerns the *Omabe* institution is that the woman who underwent this ritual is now empowered to sit with men to discuss



Plate 2
Oyima Celestina Ezema sitting with the council of elders. The elders confer her the authority to know the secrets of the *Omabe* institution. The *Agu* *Obayi* masquerade performing part of the ritual. (Photo by De Jeff photos, 2013)



Plate 3
Oyima Celestina Ezema, on horseback during her initiation.
(Photo by Arisa Digital Pix, Nsukka, 2013)



Plate 4
Oyodo Nweze Elugwu (a woman that performed the *ikpo ifu mma* rituals) exhibiting her equality with men with her mask performing behind during the Omabe festival in Aji, Enugu-Ezike. This can be viewed also via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UzqHeVfjcY>. Courtesy: the authors.

matters relating to the Omabe institution.

After the rituals in the central Omabe grove, the woman who underwent this ritual is now empowered to sit with men (Oha and Ekpuru Arua) to discuss matters relating to Omabe – and other titled men were hosted by the aspirant. On this day, the aspirant (as was the case for Lolọ Celestina Oyima Ezema) presented the community with a sturdy bull, a white ram (*Ebule ocha*), one cock, food (*igbugbu okpa, n'utara Ji*) and many gallons of fresh palm wine. All the animals were sacrificed and used in the propitiation of ontological beings in the community.¹⁰

After the merriment, the elders mandated that some people set a date with the candidate to come to her husband's village to initiate her into the Omabe masquerade institution. On the day of the final initiation, the delegates of the council of elders met with the woman in question in the ancestral meeting hall of her husband's lineage. As usual, the visiting party was entertained sumptuously by the aspirant. On this day, too, a cock and another billy goat were slaughtered at the shrine of the progenitor of the village of the aspirant. After eating, the delegates of the council of elders ordered the aspirant's husband out of the lineage hall. Then, the council of elders educated the aspirant on the secrets of Omabe. After this orientation, they led her into the *Okiti Omabe* (the house of the masked spirits). With this entry into the house of the masked spirits, the woman became fully initiated and could witness any event concerning the Omabe and could

even own a masquerade. For instance, in February 2016, it was only the masquerade owned by Lolọ Oyima Ezema that displayed in the entire Amaeze-Ani Village, Nkpunano Nsukka and thus saved the village from paying a fine that is levied on villages that have no masquerade display for that year.¹¹ However, the entry into the masked beings house is for one who took the *Oyima* title. The woman that went through the ritual of *ikpo ifu mma* enjoys all the advantages earlier mentioned but was equally permitted to carve, design and own any type of mask in Enugu-Ezike where this is applicable. To cap the equality between a woman that performed the *ikpo ifu mma* rituals with male initiates, she is qualified to go to *ugwu mma* – 'hill', where the masked beings are supposed to descend from on the day of their return from their spiritual abode. Not all men go to *ugwu mma*.

Challenges of the institution

The Omabe masquerade society and its gendered rituals are confronted with many challenges. This stems largely from the arrogance of presumption that is fostered by prejudice on the part of those who want to become 'more Catholic than the Pope' by not only denigrating but criminalising the Omabe masquerade. This must have informed Oyata to observe that 'even hapless festivals like Omabe and Odo festivals are systematically being destroyed so that their victims can earn salvation and gain a place in Heaven' (Oyata 2005). Toeing the line of

Opata's argument, Chidi Ugwu submits that converts to the received faiths reject everything about Ọmabe performances on the grounds that they are the Devil incarnate and their followership is 'idolatry', because they have come to see them as monstrosities that call for their viewing its complete rejection as a 'divine mandate' (Ugwu 2011). In this prejudiced state of mind, Christian women who ordinarily would have aspired to the *Ọyima/ikpo ifu mma* position retreat, because both the institution of Ọmabe under which this title falls and the associated rituals are seen as anathema.

Worse for the Ọmabe institution is the inability of some adherents to honour the rules of the game. This is made worse by the inability of the elders to call them to order. Reverend Fadimonuh observed that, in police stations, you might chance on erring masquerades frog-jumping or peeping from behind police cell bars fully clad in their masks, thereby bastardising the few remaining civil and social values (Fadimonuh 2006). The excesses of this group of adherents are such that, in 2006, an *Ori Okpa* was pursued by a drove of the Catholic faithful at the behest of a Catholic priest, and caught and unmasked in public (Ugwu 2011). It is common knowledge that, when one tears the garment of honour, he/she is to be dressed in shame. However, the Christians are engrossed with overgeneralisation, because all their complaints about the Ọmabe's unruly behaviour are about *Ori Okpa*, even though there are many others, such as *Edi (Eji)*, *Okokoro*, *Shasha*, *Mpuru*, *Echaricha mma*, *Agbaeji*, *Egbeochal*, *Ajija Ọmabe* and *Mgbedike*.

Another problem confronting the Ọmabe masquerade institution is that, from the outset, despite the avowed court alliance, the teachings of the missionaries were a direct challenge to basic beliefs about masquerades and traditional religion in general. The Igbo catechism, which is the quintessential documentation of Catholic missionary catechesis in Igboland, is an illustration of the depth of their attack on the native culture. The Igbo catechism lists some traditional elements of Igbo culture as grave sins (*njo ogbugbu*) for the information and formation of converts:

- (a) *Ife alusi* – worshipping idols
- (b) *Ikpoku ndi mmuo* – invocation of spirits
- (c) *Igba afa na ichu aja* – divination and sacrifices
- (d) *Ime ma obu idebe ogwu bia chekwube ya ka chukwu* – preparing or keeping charms and

amulets taken as God

(e) *Igwọ ajọ ogwu* – evil practices with medicine.

(f) *Ikwa ozu ugboro abuo ka ndi ome njo, na isonye ndi obodo mee otu ihe ahu* – the practice of second burial, etc. (Chukwuma 2010)

As is evident in the above quote, essential elements in the build-up to taking and consolidating these titles, such as sacrifices, divination and spirit invocation, are opposed by the Church and its adherents. This discourages Christian women from taking the title that empowers them to attain equal status with men.

Conclusion

The masquerade institution among the Igbo needs further research to puncture the stereotypes bandied about by some earlier writers who are not in tune with practical realities in the institution. Such research should emphasise gender roles and their relationship with gender equality and inclusiveness in the institution. As is evident in this study, rituals and rites are crucial to gender empowerment, especially as they concern the feminine gender and masquerade society in Igboland. Rituals are tailored to get permission from spirit forces and ontological beings as well as to seek their protection. The sacrifice of all male animals in the process of taking the title of *Ọyima/akporu ifu mma* depicts the Ọmabe institution as essentially masculine. However, any woman who undergoes such rituals is transformed into a man in the spiritual realm. Thus, she, like all male initiates, qualifies to know the secrets of Ọmabe and enjoy the accompanying privileges. Such privileges include sitting with men to discuss important issues that affect the society, dancing to the tune of the Ọmabe music on a special arrangement, having free entry to the house of the spirit beings and having the right to own a masquerade and to accompany masquerades to the arena, where they can entertain the public and as well as go to *ugwu mma*. Masquerades can also visit the houses of these women after every major event that involves the masquerade display in the community, especially if it involved enforcing a law. The latter privilege is extended only to the village head and no other male initiate. An *Ọyima/akporu ifu mma* is equally entitled to an invitation by the chief priest of the Ọmabe to discuss fixing dates for the display, the return of the Ọmabe from the spirit world and the date it has to depart to the spirit world, an invitation not extended to all male initiates.

The Christian attack on the *Omabe* and *Oyima/ikpo ifu mma* institution discourages some women who are Christians from getting involved with the institution, because the blood rituals involved are 'misplaced'. Christianity is founded on and sustained by blood rituals, especially among the Catholics (the predominant group in the study area that is opposed to these institutions). The Christian ritual concerns the historical blood sacrifice of a human – Jesus – while the Igbo ritual has to do with domestic animals. Condemning a culture from the prism of another culture is, to say the least, wrong, because it denies the condemned culture its peculiarity and essence. The Igbo converts should engage the West ontologically if they are to make any meaning of their culture. By doing so, the bias would be mitigated, and women would be better placed to attain equal status with men.

Finally, the egalitarian nature of Igbo society is proven by the possibility of transforming a woman into a 'man'. People can rise above their status by dint of hard work. A woman who so desires can break the bounds of gender. The masquerade institution in Igboland is generally spoken of as a male institution, but the present study has shown that there are exceptions to the rule in some societies in Igboland. 🇳🇮

ENDNOTES

- 1 Nathaniel Agbo (alias Addis Ababa), 74 years old, an ardent supporter of the Omabe practices in Lejja and one of the most proficient in the rendition of Omabe music. Interviewed at Umuoda - Eze on 19 June 2016.
- 2 Ogbanya Omega C., 89 years old, a member of the Odo masquerade group. Interviewed at Nkwo Lejja, 6 May 2015.
- 3 Lolo (Oyima Omabe) Celestina Ezema, 50 years old, spiritualist and traditional medical practitioner. Interviewed at her residence in Nsukka on 17 July 2016.
- 4 Augustine Ezema (Ishiwu Amaeze-Ani, Echara Nsukka), 62, husband of the only living Oyima in Nsukka town. Interviewed in his Ugwu Echara residence on 13 July 2012.
- 5 Chief Abonyi Onyishi, C., 92, herbalist and experienced in the rituals of title-taking. Interviewed in his Amama Ede-Oballa residence on 18 February 2016.
- 6 Ugwoke Nwiyi, C., 87, one of the few experts on the rendition of Omabe music and an ardent supporter of the institution. Interviewed at Nkwo Lejja in January 2016 during the annual worship of the Adada deity.
- 7 Ugwuagu Ezeah, C., 86, *Onye n'edu mma*, Umuezike nweze (a lineage) in Umuoda-Eze village, Lejja. Interviewed at Orié Agu Market Lejja on 9 February 2012 during the display of the Omabe masquerade from the Okekwuma quarter of Lejja.
- 8 Ngwuja Aruma, 82, an ardent member of the Omabe masquerade institution, Nru Nsukka. Interviewed at Ikpa market on 13 July 2016.
- 9 Ugwuagu Ezeah, C., 86, *Onye n'edu mma*, Umuezike nweze (a lineage) in Umuoda-Eze village, Lejja, interviewed cited.
- 10 Lolo (Oyima Omabe) Celestina Ezema, interview cited.
- 11 Ikechukwu Asogwa (Alias Panie), 43, chair of the Umakashi Youths. Interview held at the premises of Ohe Deity Nsukka, behind Solive Oils Plant (Son of Paddy) on 10 May 2016, when Lolo Oyima Ezema took two rams that were slaughtered for Ohe, after which four cannon shots were fired.

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