

DECONSTRUCTING ANAMBRA IGBO *IJELE* MASQUERADE UPPER SECTION FOR MODERN SCULPTURAL EXPRESSION

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Abstract

The forms that are seen on the *Ijele* masquerade have never been used by visual artists as a source of inspiration in sculpture. Artists tend to focus more on using the rigid forms for representation and entertainment. It has been observed that the *Ijele* masquerade is unique, and not like other masquerades because of the obvious nature and accumulation which comprise of the interpretation of the Anambra Igbo philosophy, represented in sculptural forms and uli motif design, this also includes the way it moves and glides, coupled with other activity that is happening around the spirit. Scholars have equally written on the *Ijele* masquerade, and have continually called for the use of African idioms to express a true African identity. The paper sets out to discuss the activity that takes place on the *Ijele* masquerade head rest, usually rendered in rigid form, which is a summary of the Anambra Igbo philosophy, and equally discusses three sculptural works that emanated from deconstructing the upper section (head rest) of the *Ijele* masquerade.

Keywords: Deconstruction, *Ijele*, Masquerade, Modern, Sculpture, Expression

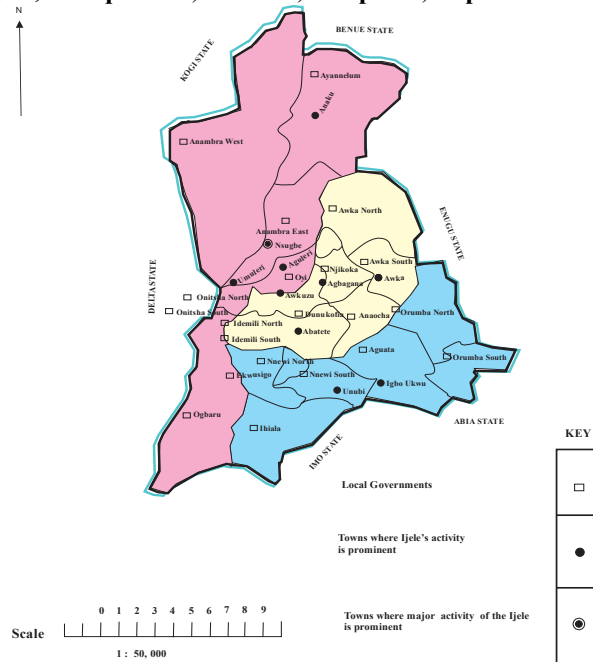


Fig 1: Administrative Map of Anambra State showing towns, indicating where the *Ijele* Masquerade activity takes place. Source: <https://anambrastate.gov.ng/our-maplgas/>, Retrieved on April 16, 2017.

Introduction

Anambra State is an Anglicised version of the original Oma Mbala; the native name of the Anambra river. The origin of its name is derived from the Anambra River (Oma Mbala) which is a tributary of the famous river Niger. The capital and the seat of government are at Awka, Onitsha and Nnewi which are the biggest commercial and industrial cities. The indigenous ethnic groups in Anambra state are the Igbos, which form 89% of the population and a small population of 2% of the Igala, who live mainly in the north-western part of the state. The people of Anambra state share boundaries with Delta state to the West, Imo state and Rivers state to the South, Enugu State to the East and Kogi state to the North. The *Ijele* masquerade activity is most popular at the northern part of the Oma Mbala area (Maduagwu, 2013). *Ijele* was originally intended to scare away the early missionaries who came to Igbo Land. The masquerade also is engaged in the celebration of royalty and greatness in Igbo land. (A, Olottah, personal communication, March 03, 2015).

Nwanna (2007) states that the origin of the *Ijele* is similar to that of most Igbo masquerade, which is still obscure. Okachi (2015) is of the view that, in ancient times about forty-five masquerades performed on top of the *Ijele* masquerade.

Ijele in Igbo land is seen as a metaphysical entity endowed with physical form and multiple meanings. Aniakor (1978), Robinson (2010), and Nwa-Ikenga (2011) are of the view that, the *Ijele* masquerade is decorated with figurine depictions of the everyday aspect of human life. Three main categories dominate the masquerade's design: human and their daily activities; the spirit world; animals and forestry.

Nwanna (2007), Ogbechie (2009), Nwa-Ikenga (2011), Mbanaja (2012), and Okachi (2015) posit that the *Ijele* comprises of two segments: the upper and lower segments divided at the center by a big python. The upper part or the headdress is called *Mkpu Ijele*. It contains depictions of important moments in life; images of women in labour, and men climbing fruit trees are placed besides critical political experiences.

In the past, it took about one hundred artists and their assistants to work for six months continuously in preparing the *Ijele* costumes before the performance. Presently, it can take one traditional artist a period of one to four months to produce the *Ijele* masquerade because of technological advancement. Most part of the *Ijele*'s costume is made up of textile materials. Before the invention of sewing machines, the act of sewing was done manually. At present, the use of machines has helped in speeding up the processes of sewing. A large *Ijele* will be done by six skilled artists for about two months, working for about six hours per day and seven days a week (Nwanna, 2007).

In summary to all that is described of the *Ijele* masquerade by various scholars, one can say that *Ijele* is a collection of love poetry with its forms, motifs, and movement. *Ijele* is like all the poems written by poets, in a particular language and subject which are compiled into one singular form. It is rich in assorted forms, colours, and myth.

Masquerades are sent from the spirit world through an ant hole to interact with human beings (Enekwe, 1987). In the early times during the slave trade, masquerades were used for intimidation, to scare people, catch and sell them into slavery. Presently they are portrayed as dead men that came back to life. They play, dance and make fun. They tell stories of what happened in the spirit world and spoke with the harsh voice and people admired masquerade activities (Ejiofor, 1984).

Okoye (2007) states:

Apart from masquerades being performers, they are unarguably the most popular form of communal cultural expression. They are figured as ancestral characters who presumably take on physical forms on the invitation of the community to participate in important communal ceremonies or perform specific social or religious roles. The traditional Igbo masquerade deploys postcolonial discursive strategies as mimicry, allegory, parody, ridicule and translation in its engagement with colonialism (p.55).

Masquerades serve as visible expressions of spiritual force and authority that validate the beliefs of society, and reinforce acceptable social modes of conduct. They also symbolise the spiritual power that eradicates social evils. Igbo people believe that, spirits are capable of animating any material object; the masquerade has been a vehicle for the manifestation of the dead and other supernatural forces, including nature spirits and deities, as well as idols created by the imagination and reinforced using ritual and magic (Seleh, 2010).

In the contemporary time artists, explore the use of the masquerade as a concept in creating artworks. Contemporary artists are seen to borrow from traditional elements. Ogbechie (2009) also suggests that it might be more useful to consider all contemporary engagements with indigenous cultures as forms of appropriation that adapt cultural concepts, signs, and symbols. Contemporary African art appropriates indigenous traditions of visual culture in its search for significant ways.

Stockstad (2008) states that in searching for ways to express an African identity in art, some of these artists draw inspiration from indigenous traditions. Most contemporary works have a clear relationship with traditional African folklore, belief systems and imagery. Nwanna (2010) supports the above submission that African art contains elements of traditional art; thereby establishing continuity from traditional to contemporary. Filani (2013) confirms that African contemporary artists now engage and experiment with unconventional materials known as new media, including installation, performance,

video art and other formats. Frank (2008), maintains that, most artists are experimenting with modern styles as they search for new ways to express their roots. Modern African sculptures are seen to reflect both the preservation of local sculptural traditions and the introduction of styles, and techniques from outside the continent.

It is possible to see the evidence of borrowing of ideas infused into the created works of art, and there is the manifestation of creativity whereby the artist produces something new and distinctive within the range of forms and patterns which become a part of the innovation in the design (Bascom and Herskovits, 1959).

African mask was first recognised by Europeans as art in 1905 as well as its aesthetic value, and thereafter became worthy of scholarly attention, and its timeless quality became noticeable to the world at large (Adams, 2007). According to Aronson (1991), it attracted and inspired the Western artists like Pablo Picasso, when he paid a visit to his friend Amedeo Clemente Modigliani and saw the Congo mask displayed on his wall. This mask encountered by Picasso, inspired the development of Cubism in art.

In understanding aesthetic issues properly in sculpture, more traditional values need to be considered like the *Ijele* masquerade of Anambra State. *Ijele* is an embodiment of philosophy, general life experience and value attached to the Anambra Igbo. This is visible and evident in its complex nature. Ogbachie (2009) writes, *Ijele* masquerade possesses forms and conceptual ideas which if analysed and transformed could enhance appreciation of aesthetics in the expanded adventures of post-modernist sculpture.

To further buttress the need to use the *Ijele* masquerade head rest as a source of inspiration to create sculptures for posterity, Ikuemesi (2000) believes that most part of Igbo land were reduced to ruin because of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war of 1967 – 1970, and more so, the influx of western way of life (Christianity) threatened the continued existence of the foundation of Igbo art and tradition. Nwosu (2014) states that *Ijele* masquerade is known as the biggest masquerade in South Saharan Africa. It is a unique intangible heritage that belongs to the Igbo people of Nigeria and was listed in the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) archive as intangible cultural element in need of urgent safeguarding. Thus, the *Ijele* masquerade can be manipulated and used as a source of inspiration in creating sculptures and for posterity.

The *Ijele* masquerade's upper section (Head rest)

It is said that the *Ijele* masquerade design resembles circular Igbo buildings with conical roof; without a doubt, it is the most impressive of the masquerades performed by the Igbo people and is regarded as bringing peace to the community. The inhabitants of a particular village would create a masquerade

from this breath-taking design to promote harmony and communal dialogue. Each masquerade is then collectively owned and can only be used on special occasions on the authority of the kings and elders of the community (Arinze in Priston *et al*, 2008). Ugiomoh (2012) states;

Ijele masquerade's aggregate parts will always consonate to define the totality of an essence. Here, a disparate unit asserts their independence even in the context of the whole without diminishing their essence or that of the whole. Despite the fact that it encompasses all the spirits, it is composed of various forms of animals, humans, trees, in general term forms that are defined and undefined (p.22)

Enekwe (1987) observes that, the notable figures found in the *Ijele* comprise women in labour, men climbing palm trees to cut fruits, a chief making his annual appearance accompanied by his musicians, realistic figures of local animals, cocks or fowls, a man carrying either a child or his wife on his shoulders, a lady showing off her status, a well-dressed gentle man displaying his outfit, figures of colonial officials strolling with his wife or escorted by a policeman. There are figures representing the world of the spirits. Animal figures are also represented such as leopards and antelopes.

The figure on horseback at the top of the masquerade represents a colonial District Officer or Igbo king. Overall, the motifs represent the interplay of the spiritual, animal and physical worlds; all these portray and express the harmony that prevails in the Igbo communities. Ogbechie (2009) and Robinson (2010) explain that, the presence of the European adds to the power of the *Ijele*. He is placed on the superstructure not as a mockery but as a power symbol. He represents the unlimited authority of the colonial era and provides validity to the rituals being performed. As the epitome of Igbo ideals of achievement, authority, and status associated with the founding fathers/ ancestors, *Ijele* is symbolically charged masquerade. The presence of the colonial figure does, in fact, add a dimension of caricature and playfulness to a serious and powerful ritual. The *Ijele* masquerade is not simply a political commentary on colonialism. However, its main function is religious. It is a symbol of the continuity and ritual well-being in the community of its owners, therefore, the presence of the European adds to the community's definition of itself.

The *Ijele* is adorned with materials that are very expensive and rich in every aspect as the major disguise that imbues the spirit with supernatural essence, which is necessary for role-change. Okafor and Aniakor in Robinson (2010) categorise the many figures represented on the *Ijele* masquerade into three, which are; man and daily activities, the spirit world, animals and nature. The colonial District Officer is a prominent figure among the human and daily life sculptures. *Ijele* is big, but its symbolism is larger than a house and as large as the Igbo cosmos. The icons on the massive gliding figure include

representation of human activities, animals, and even items of change such as cars and aeroplanes. It represents prosperity, joy, and celebration. It is *Ife nkili*, (a great spectacle).

The masquerade is comprised of two segments. The top cylinder is adorned with doll-sized detailed effigies of various characters, such as little children. There are also figures of what appears to be a chief, a man, woman and a bird in a tree. The figures are arranged next to one another, with small spaces between each one, in two rows which appear to wrap around the upper level of the mask. The heads of the figures are attached to a slender stick running above the row, while the legs are held in place by a rope running below the row. Trees fashioned from ropes also adorn the shorter sides of the top cylinder. At the very top of the masquerade is a white man sitting on top of a horse wearing a hat and smoking a cigar. Right next to him is a figure of a black man holding a long flag pole. There are also two very long hands, possibly made out of cloth, sticking out from both sides of the masquerade (Deluca, 2012).

Analyses of the sculptures, based on deconstruction of the *Ijele* masquerade's upper section

Elegance: Plate I (outdoor installation sculpture of *Ijele*) is the monumental installation sculpture of the *Ijele*. Apart from its huge and intimidating structure, she is believed to be the mother earth goddess, in charge of fertility, caring like a mother who takes care of her home. Installation art introduces sculptural materials into space in order to transform our experience of it. It can be sight specific designed for a particular space. If installations are works created to fill an interior architectural space which is activated by the presence of human beings in the space, it should come as no surprise that artists would, in turn, come to concern themselves with the live human activity that goes on in space. Many may even conceive themselves or other people in their works as something similar to live sculptures, such live sculptures as performance art (Sayer, 2007).

Bishop (2005) said:

Installation art addresses the viewer directly as a literal presence in the space. Rather than imagining the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance, it presupposes an embodied viewer whose sense of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision (p.23).

The Igbo society believes so much in diverse performance arts like masquerades, music, dance, songs, drama, and poetic chants, which are inseparable things that influence each other and serve as a link with the supernatural. The masquerading activity is an important vehicle to display performance (Urama, 2012).

The huge intimidating size of this welded sculpture can be seen as being quite imposing. Its arrays of colours were carefully considered by the researcher. *Elegance* connotes stylishness, grace, style,

sophistication, class, taste, classiness, chic, modishness, refinement and smart. Apart from the fact that the gigantic installation sculpture stands to intimidate, its elegant nature and appearance represent the true nature of the *Ijele* masquerade in performance. These are visible in the representation of the movement and the grace at which the welded sculpture holds and swings her hand fan. It is also the common nature of any woman who takes her time to dress gorgeously, would carefully walk graciously, majestically, and glide while walking along the road, because she is proud of herself and would always want people to pay nice compliments to her as she walks on. The welded outdoor installation sculpture was also titled Macrocosm meaning a complex structure, an example is the universe considered as a single entity that contains numerous scale structures (Encarta, 2016). *Elegance* contains within itself numerous structures that sums up all the activity that was explored in the studio exploration. It is a culmination of all the works explored and created in the studio. The *Ijele* is believed to be comprised of conglomerates of activities. This explains the nature of the imposing welded sculpture titled *Elegance*.



Plate I: *Elegance*, Mild Steel Rods and Fabric, 6 m X 3.4 m, 2016

Observance 1 and 2: Plates II and III depict celebration of a religious occasion, or the practice of a religious rite and ritual purity ceremony, which is common in *Ijele* masquerade performance. Religion refers to an organized system involving beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols which allow the individual to connect to the sacred or the transcendent God, a principal superior organizer, or ultimate truth (Koenig *et al*, 2001).

In observation I one sees a woman lifting up a basket with her right hand. She appears to be in a frenzy mood. Her head is bent backwards and her left hand stretched out as if she was saying ‘Please accept this offering and grant my request’. She is dressed in the normal dual two colours of red and white. The introduction of yellow was to help compliment the two colours introduced.

When ritual purity is demanded in Igbo land, the priest or priestess must wash his or her hands before offering sacrifice. So must the family head too, before the Morning Prayer, with the offering of kola and probably some liberation. The victims are often washed too, especially their legs and mouths. For some spirits the priest must not taste oil before the morning sacrifice. As a preliminary to a sacrifice the diviner can order his client to slaughter a rooster (Plate III) and carry the dismembered parts to the bush-paths to inform the spirit that he is coming to make sacrifice to it. Also minor sacrifices can be prescribed before a major sacrifice to a big spirit. The priest becomes the mediator between man and God. For one to achieve that union, one must be liberated from self. To realize liberation the ego or I must be left behind. The I that must be transcended is the I of both conscious reality of the senses and the I of subconscious tendencies and memories. To achieve liberation a person must see the difference between the illusory world of the matter and the real world of the spirit. The person must cease to think of himself as matter, and identify himself with the absolute (Arinze, 1970, Samuels *et al*, 1975, and Ejiofor, 1984).

The priest must be knowledgeable of the various forces and spirits so as to be able to mediate well. Arinze (1970) believes that, there are superior powers, invisible spirits, the ancestors, and there are also human spirits of wicked deceased people. The Igbo regards some of these higher powers as kind and reasonable. Many as severe, and others as bad, wicked and capricious. Igbo sacrifice can be grouped under four headings: (1) expiation, (2) sacrifice to ward off molestation from unknown evil spirits, (3) petition and, (4) thanksgiving.

The insufficiency of a human being and his consequent inability to walk uprightly is recognised by the Igbo. The Igbo recognises God's supreme dominion and knows that no spirit can do anything if Chukwu decides otherwise. This is why sacrifices are offered to atone and cleanse the *Ijele's* performer in order to avert imminent dangers and calamities for everyone involved with the activity of the masquerade ceremonial display and also after the performance.



Plate II: *Observance I*, mild steel rod and fabric, 128 X 89 cm, 2016.



Plate III: *Observance 2*, mild steel rod and fabric, 123 X 76 cm, 2016.

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