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# Ekpe Ikwuano as Masquerade Drama

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**Abstract.**
The present study focuses on Ekpe Ikwuano as a masquerade drama. The study which developed from oral literature, tries to situate the Ekpe Ikwuano into the mainstream of traditional Igbo/African masquerade drama with objective proofs. The researcher adopts performance theory as the theoretical framework of the study. Performance theory is a theory that deals with a pattern of action or behaviour that surrounds any activity, especially in drama, theatre, arts and literature. The relevance of performance theory here is that it helped also to give this work good shape for advancement. The Ekpe Ikwuano masquerade drama mainly involves action or performance which dealt with the people's culture and tradition. Therefore, the ingredients or qualities of performance theory were used for the propagation of this work. The work of Richard Schechner is used to drive home the points of performance theory as it relates to Ekpe Ikwuano. In Africa, performance theory relates more with traditional African drama or performances. In the course of the study it was seen that Ekpe Ikwuano dramatized the culture, tradition, and heritage of Ikwuano people. The research also revealed that Ekpe Ikwuano, which originated from Ikwuano Igbo land, is very different from the Ekpe of the Cross River origin, which spread to Arochukwu, Bende, and Ngwa areas of Igbo land. The researcher digressed to teach his readers what the Ekpe of the Cross River origin means, through the help of tone-mark and objective analysis from relevant sources, to avoid further confusion and complications from people, especially those outside the Ekpe performance region. In this case, there is the Ekpe of Igbo origin, and Ekpe of Cross River origin. The study therefore recommends that the Ekpe Ikwuano festival, be preserved for continuity, growth, and progress.

**Keywords:** Performance, Ekpe, masquerade drama, Igbo theatre, masking.
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## Introduction

This study tries as much as possible to show what makes the Ekpe Ikwuano a masquerade drama. The background here gives the details of the ideas, foundation, origin, existence and practice of the Ekpe Ikwuano masquerade drama. Further, here is also an overview of the work, hence the general description it embodies.

The Ekpe Ikwuano, also known as Ekpe Igbo-Ikwuano originated from the concept of the need to cleanse the land of evil. Its structure originated from the re-enactment of the headhunting escapade. There is the imitation of action here which is the drama. There is nothing that stops the people from killing the sacrificial goat through the normal process, but they want to put up an adventure, a drama to impress everyone since it is also a communal affair, and create an unusual dramatic scene. This head-hunting also marks the origin and development of the dramas of some other countries of the world. This view is supported by Richard Schechner who says that:

> I think drama as it developed in China, Japan, Korea, India, America, and Greece derived from circumpolar hunting cultures (the remnants of which still exist in Siberia and in pockets throughout the Americas) that also developed shamanism. These cultures very early associated hunting-killing, fertility, animality, curing, spirit possession, and crisis initiation through man-made ordeals.... I don't speak of Africa because I know little about Africa. But if I'm right, then African drama will also be associated with hunting.... Drama develops in cultures for whom hunting is especially important. (109)

Schechner associates the derivation (origin) and development of drama to certain ritual activities that he believes links China, Japan, Korea, India, America and Greece. Though he

says that he does not know much about Africa his observation that African drama "will also be associated with hunting." He also believes that drama develops in cultures that value hunting. Africa values hunting. very much, and the Ekpe Ikwuano, which is one of her dramas originated from hunting experience, fertility, animal sacrifice, spirit possession and so on.

The festival, which is an inheritance from the people's ancestors right from their origin, is also called January festival, for that is the only month the festival could be held in Ikwuano. Also, after the performance, a new farming season sets in. The performance dramatizes the strength, power, heroism, and courage of Ikwuano people, and there is the need for communal participation during the dramatization. The community square (*ama*), which could accommodate the whole community, is the natural stage for the performance of the festival. The people employed their peculiar style in the dramatization, and in the process, masking, dancing, costuming and other arts are utilized. All these tell much of the history of Ikwuano people and their arts.

Emeka Nwabueze traces the origin and development of Igbo masquerade drama thus:
A critical appraisal of Igbo masquerade drama by an empirical investigator and participant-observer would reveal that it might have followed the same method of origination and development of ritual as theatre. Thus the same reasons that account for the origin of theatre may have accounted for the origin of Igbo masquerade performances. (40)

Furthermore, Nwabueze also states as follows:

> *Empirical investigation in Igboland and participant observation of masquerade performances carried out in Nri, Awka, and some areas of Nsukka in Igboland also reveal that Igbo masquerade drama originated from ancestral worship. The Igbos believe that a dead man travels to the land of the ancestors from where he reincarnates into the temporal world. Prominent men, the Igbos also believe, especially those who were brave and who performed great feats during their lifetime, could reincarnate and still retain their prominence and status among the ancestors. These are the brand of ancestors that were usually invoked as masquerade. (45)*

Nwabueze explains how beyond the ordinary invocation of the ancestors, a situation arose when the masquerade, their representative, had to be recreated as a character in the drama.

In spite of the fact that the background research highlighted by Nwabueze was carried out in Nri, Awka, and some areas of Nsukka in Igbo land, this investigation is relevant in most areas of Igbo land. The Ekpe Ikwuano masquerade is a masquerade of fertility and progress. The chief actor who is a dramatic character represents the ancestors, and he goes to Alaishiama deity, and pays homage to it for a successful outing. He also visits some village heads before heading to the community square with his crew.

One or two other relevant deities are also consulted as part of the ritual process. Then if the chief actor observes all the needful traditional processes but could not decapitate the goat's head at once, which is considered as an abomination, the people would commonly believe that such misfortune was caused by supernatural forces or evil charms from the enemies of the community. The community would therefore not hesitate to find ways of solving the problem. This validates Nwabueze's thesis that "when a plague or misfortune visited the Igbo society for instance, it was believed that such unfortunate situations were caused by supernatural forces unknown to the living but quite familiar to the dead" (45).

Such practice of worship to Alaishiama deity aligns with the fact that Ekpe Ikwuano as Igbo masquerade drama also originated from ancestral worship. This is because the chief actor also worships the ancestors through his veneration or homage to Alaishiama and other deities. This lures the ancestors to come and intercede for him and the people he represents.

J. O. J Nwachukwu - Agbada provides us with a detailed background into the names and ecology of masquerades in Igboland. According to him, The masquerade among the Igbo goes by

a multiple of names, depending on the part of Igboland. Although much of the ethnic group uses the term *mmonwu, mmanwu, mmo (mmaw) or mma*, the Onitsha area uses both *mmo* and *egwugwu*, ditto the latter's use in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) whose author is from Ogidi near metropolitan city of Onitsha. *Egwugwu* may be a corruption of the Yoruba *egungun* (masquerade) as the term is not widely applied in Igboland. In the Nsukka area, Odo and Omabe are associated with a certain mask type. Among the Southern Igbo, special types of the masquerade would include the Owu and Okorosha which extend to the Igbo in the Niger Delta region. *Ekpe, Ekpo, Okonko* etc. refer to the types which may be found in the Cross River area, spreading up to the Ngwa and Bende segments of Igboland. Each town tried to bring certain distinctive features to its *mmonwu* even as the functions remained similar throughout the Igbo culture area, namely religious, leadership, social, artistic and entertainment functions. Of these uses, it is only its entertainment value that remains to date. (111)

The Ekpe, Ekpo, and Okonko masquerades or societies are actually found in the Cross River/Akwa Ibom axis, which spread to Ngwa and Bende segments of Igbo land. These types of masquerades belong to cult or traditional societies where young boys or adult males are initiated as members of each of the masquerade groups. In other words, these Igbo areas actually borrowed the culture from Cross River people. Bende and Ngwa segments of Igbo land still practise Ekpe, Ekpo or Okonko traditions, but their influences in these Igbo areas have largely reduced due to the influence of Christianity and modernism.

Nwachukwu - Agbada throws more light on the masquerade tradition as follows:

> *The masquerade was an agent of socialization. The masquerade society in traditional times ensured a formal socialization process, particularly of the male in the Igbo cultural hemisphere. The masquerade guild demanded a socialization arrangement for future members, and thus a social standard was set for all males who wanted to be regarded as fulfilled and achieved men. The guild was a 'secret society', not in the sense of being restricted to few, chosen people, but instead it was a measure of integration of men into the cultural and social structure of the community. Uninitiated adults were supposed to take to their heels on encountering a masquerade just as women and children were wont to do. (115)*

Ekpe (high-low) or Okonko as practised in Old Bende, Ngwa and few other segments of Igbo land are the same, and have their symbols known as *Akara- ala* in Igbo. The birth of a male child into the family brings greater joy and happiness. The father, who is already an Ekpe member, stays for one, two or three years before putting his son's name in the Ekpe register. Some fathers even add their sons' names immediately after birth to establish seniority in the Ekpe cult register. The father who puts his son's name in the register makes his intention known that his son will be a member of the group when he grows up.

The attainment of maturity age means that the child can be initiated into Ekpe or Okonko cult. The initiation is called *Imara Ekpe* or *Imara Okonko* (to know Ekpe or Okonko), where the cult symbols, rules, are shown to the initiates. This process is very expensive because the aspirant must provide all the necessary items for the initiation into the sect or cult. The initiation process is usually a big feast, as people would come to eat, drink and enjoy themselves. This Ekpe or Okonko initiation is not unlike some of the symbolic activities that characterize the Iwa Akwa Traditional Ceremony of the Obowo people in Imo State.

The Ekpe Ikwuano is a 'traditionally conceived masked spirit.' This masquerade performance also has a dialogue, and it is performed within a restricted space that equals a stage. It is a fact that all the masquerades in Igbo land are generally or loosely referred to as *mmonwu* or *mmanwu* despite their specific names, origins, purposes or intentions. Nnabuenyi Ugonna has reminded us that:

> *The term, mmonwu is generally used in two different senses either as a general concept for all forms of plays, masking or as sacred masked drama, in which 'traditionally conceived masked spirits' perform various dramatic activities in speeches and dialogue, on an open air arena or stage... this tradition of mmonwu was first originated in Egbema Ozubulu in the nineteenth century by an Arochukwu immigrant whose home can still be traced and whose descendants are alive. The name of this Aro man was Okonkwo Ogbuchi who in about 1840 got together some renowned dibia (medicine men) in Egbema Ozubulu and initiated them into the secret knowledge of mmonwu which was reputedly revealed to him in a dream. (495*)

For Jas Amankulor who believes that "the Ekpe festival is very popular among the Ngwa of Igboland. It is also widely celebrated in neighbouring areas such as the old Umuahia and Owerri provinces.'' It is important to note that "The Ekpe festival, an action-packed festival, full of song and dance, is one of such cultural events, a deeper investigation of which would reveal its great significance as religious ritual and potentialities as dance drama" (113). Amankulor has made it clear that ''Ekpe (tone-marked--,low-low) should not be confused with Ekpe (tone-marked--, high-low)" mainly because "the latter is a secret society which is exclusive to men, and which is also called Okonko in many parts of Igboland" (113).

Ekpe Ikwuano belongs to the one with the low-low tone-mark, as identified by Amankulor. The participation in Ekpe festival by all the people in the community makes it more of a drama, because traditional African drama involves the participation of everyone. It is either one is a participant or a spectator who is engaged emotionally, physically and psychologically in the drama, and both of them work together to make a good drama.

Unlike the Ekpe that Jas Amankulor investigated, Ekpe Ikwuano knows nothing about *Ikpa Unwu*, *Ira Ugu*, *Iwa Ji*, *Igba Ogbom*, and the rest of the "activities and ceremonies" (Amankulor 114). Ekpe Ikwuano cycle or structure is different in many ways from that of Umuode-Nsulu in Ngwa area, which Amankulor worked on. The Ekpe Ikwuano cycle reflects the various stages or activities of the Ekpe Ikwuano which this work embodies. There are however some similarities between Ekpe Ikwuano and Ekpe Umuode-Nsulu community which will be explained as this work progresses.

The Ekpe Ikwuano sees the decapitation of a goat's head at one machete stroke as sacrifice for fecundity in the land. This practice marked the origin and development of Ekpe Ikwuano masquerade drama. The Ekpe Ikwuano and Ekpe Umuode-Nsulu share the same staging. Amankulor describes the staging thus:

> *The only staging device of Ekpe is the ''Arena Staging'' in its most traditional form. There is no raised platform for the chief actor or the drummers. Everybody is on the same level including the spectators who have to peep over a forest of heads to see what is going on in the innermost circle enclosing the chief actor and masquerade dancer. Nearby tree branches help to form the auditorium. (119)*

The staging device in Ekpe Ikwuano is worthwhile in this study. The arena or village square has a demarcation where the sacrificial performance takes place. This section is demarcated with *omu* - palm fronds in a circular or rectangular formation, and the sacrificial goat is kept inside it. This is where the chief actor stays to perform the sacrifice for the land. The palm frond is sacred to the people, and forms a link or covenant between the ancestors and the living. This demarcation is a battle ring between the masker and the goat while spectators surround them. The demarcation here is synonymous with that of a traditional wrestling contest in Igbo land where two fighters are made to wrestle in a demarcated area.

The Ekpe Ikwuano provides for a greater communication between the chorus (song) and the chief actor. This promotes communal representation. Though Ekpe Ikwuano is a traditional drama, its structures are constructed in such a way that they fit into many situations or environments which make it to be above the level of traditional art, and it has the features of good masquerade drama. The performance of the Ekpe Ikwuano in a modern setting

requires a traditional touch just as the performance of the Western oriented drama requires the reading of a text or script before its performance. The background processes of Ekpe Ikwuano lead to its physical performance. Ekpe Ikwuano does not exist in a vacuum because it has established processes behind its existence, which must be followed.

The Ekpe Ikwuano is celebrated in honour and thanksgiving to *Ala*, the Earth goddess of the Igbo people. This is why in Ikwuano, the *Alaishiama* deity is the deity associated with Ekpe. *Ala*, is the Earth goddess while *Ishiama* means the head or core of the square. *Ama*, as mentioned here is a general open square which sometimes serves as the community square, where the *Alaishiama* deity is mostly located. In the context of the performance, the Ekpe Ikwuano masquerade represents good, while the goat represents evil. There is a conflict between the two which culminates into the climax that defines the performance.

The Ekpe Ikwuano masquerade makes sure that good triumphs over evil. The January festival marks the beginning of the New Year celebration, which also happens to be the start of the year in the Gregorian calendar. This becomes a most propitious time for the sacrifice of the land, since the Ekpe Ikwuano performance ushers in good or progress in all spheres of life, including the new farming season which is very important to the people. The performance takes place in January.

**The Ekpe Ikwuano as Masquerade Drama**

The Ekpe Ikwuano is a masquerade drama that defines the people's way of life. The lives of the ancestors and those of the present generation are shown during the Ekpe Ikwuano masquerade drama.

The Masquerade or festival drama is the authentic or original African drama, which also forms the foundation of any other form of drama in Africa. The origin and features of African drama are the important factors that define it. This work falls under Igbo masquerade drama, because the masquerade is the central focus of the performance. Afam Ebeogu gives insight on the African drama which could also be festival or masquerade performances when he notes that:

> *Those who would be content to regard ''African drama'' as born out of quintessential African experience would simply draw our attention to the ritualistic and non ritualistic performances in the African communities of pre-colonial times, some of which performances have persevered even in our modern ''literate'' environment. These performances, whether ''festival'' or ''masquerade'' performances, whether religious or secular having their roots in the African communal imagination, and embodying the quintessence of the African psyche, remain the yardsticks for assessing how African a dramatic event is. Whether the dramatic experience is oral, or whether it is written, becomes of secondary importance; its Africanness in terms of origin and character remains the essential factor. (1)*

Ekpe Ikwuano as masquerade drama is often undertaken by everyone (men, boys, women, girls, and children). However, it parades only one masquerade. This is why Ikwuano students have on various occasions staged the festival as their trade- mark culture, in various university auditoriums or open spaces across the world during their cultural exhibitions.

The Ekpe Ikwuano, as masquerade drama has its own nature which is great and acceptable. The masquerade drama is inspirational, which helps people to be creative. The high spirits or exciting moods of people during the festival bring forth acrobatic displays, painting, dance and other forms of creativity or entertainment.

The Ekpe Ikwuano is unique. It is one of the most celebrated festivals of Ikwuano people, where hundreds of people gather at the same time to see the Ekpe. Its uniqueness lies in the drama therein and its popularity, as it is one of the most popular festivals of the Ikwuano people. The Ekpe Ikwuano is the most associated product of Ikwuano whose cycle resonates only around it.

Ekpe Ikwuano is result-oriented. The spectators expect to get results through the performance. This expectation of result is anchored on the ritual and aesthetic aspect. The

reactions of the spectators is part of the entertainment process. The performance produces the drama itself. The success of the chief actor brings the sense of drama, beauty, aesthetics, elegance and pleasure to the people, but his failure reminds them of the ritual aspect. Ekpe Ikwuano is a serious adventure. It is not just a performance for performance sake. This means that the Ekpe combines both religious and aesthetic activities to function. It is also a wonder-making masquerade, that recreates the oral heritage or traditions of the people.

Songs and dance are part of the nature of the Ekpe Ikwuano masquerade drama. The songs flow into the dance, which makes both of them to be inseparable. The Ikwuano War Dance and the killing of the goat in one stroke of the machete are among the most recognizable features of Ekpe Ikwuano. Therefore, the Ikwuano War Dance also forms the foundation for Ekpe Ikwuano.

**The Structure of Ekpe Ikwuano Masquerade Drama**

The structure of Ekpe Ikwuano masquerade drama or festival blends with the tenor of the design of many African traditional performances. It is against such a background that Oyin Ogunba notes that:

> *Each important traditional festival lasts for a considerable time which may be three, seven, nine or sixteen days, a month or even three months. Each tends to have a story or myth to perform, and each makes use of its own peculiar style in the dramatic realization of the story. In the process, the arts of costuming, masking, drumming, chanting, dancing and several others are utilized in a manner not totally dissimilar to their usage in their dramatic traditions.Thus, each year there is a cycle of performances which evokes much of the history of the community and also brings to light all the artistic forms in the community. It is this total presentation that is properly to be regarded as traditional African festival drama. (5)*

The Ekpe Ikwuano festival is in three phases. The first phase or day one shows the chief priest who goes to the gods and ancestors to seek their permission for the performance. He goes with his sacrifices (Igbo fowl, Igbo kola, etc) to appease or woo them, employing dance, songs, libation, incantations, dramatic movements or gestures. This is part of the pre-festival activities which also forms the background of the festival. The chief priest does this as part of the tradition of Ekpe Ikwuano. This practice is a precautionary measure against possible future problems if the festival is staged, because the gods and ancestors see what humans do not see. The remaining two phases or two days are action- packed. The interval between day one and the two action-packed days may be some hours, one day, two days, or more.

The first action- packed day is the eve of the festival, when the people indulge themselves in drinking, merriment, fun, singing and dancing around the community especially at night, and extensive rehearsals for the performers. This is called *Iru Ota Ekpe* or *Igba Ota Ekpe*. This action is synonymous with the conventional or modern theatre where performers do a lot of rehearsals before the main performance. The background activities or preparations are very essential for effective performance in the presence of the audience or spectators.

The second action-packed day is the main day of the festival, which is the day of performance. The performance here is a combination of tragedy and comedy because while some people break down in tears at the sight of the gruesome manner in which the innocent goat is killed, others are happy for the event. There is a justification for those who cry, because the goat too is part of God's creation and it deserves pity. The goat becomes something like a scapegoat for the society. Unfortunately however, its cry cannot save it from being slain.

This second day, which is the main festival day, has to do with the entry stage of the chief actor and his crew as they enter the village square for the first time. Cannons (ntu n'ala) are fired to mark this stage, and to announce his presence. This stage is also called the village square stage. The crowd goes berserk with excitement at the sight of them. The masker performs some dances or displays before the elders of the land who are seated already, in order

to gain their approval and blessings- they would hail him and say ‘‘*Ogbu sam, ogbu sam*. You will succeed! Go and make us proud!’’ After this utterance, the chief actor is happy with the encouragement, and nods in agreement. Dialogue is also spotted here. The crew or escorts are also very active, and give the masquerade the maximum support and encouragement to face the task ahead, in the same manner the audience. The crew or escorts clear the road for the masker with the help of their brooms, and help him with some vital information. However, the spectators or audience must not know about this, in order not to demean the spiritual stance of the masker. The masker therefore must be a man of wisdom who knows when and how to apply tact and diplomacy in the execution of his task.

The masker also tries as much as possible to hide his personal feelings and emotions, including stage fright, in order to protect the sacredness of the mask. He moves around the village square with vigour as people scamper for safety but he is often controlled by his tail bearer or chief guard. Though he is under spiritual influence he is nonetheless aware of what he is doing to a large extent.

**The Costumes, Symbols, and Images of the Ekpe Ikwuano**

The costumes worn during the Ekpe Ikwuano festival are very colourful. The chief actor undergoes the process of masking, where he puts on his mask, which is his costume. This mask-wearing is a sacred action called *Ifu Ekpe.* It is done in a secret chamber totally hidden from the profane gaze of women, children, and men who have no traditional role to play during the decoration of the chief actor. The name of the Ekpe Ikwuano mask, or the costumes worn by the chief actor is *Obu Ekpe* (the place/house where the Ekpe lives), and it is the oldest man from the kindred of chief actors, who is also the chief priest that is the custodian of the sacred item(s). He releases it on demand from the community, but not without some gifts to the old man. It is sent back to him after use.

The secret decoration of the chief actor is to establish the needed aura of spirituality that would instill fear and prestige in the minds of the people. The chief actor, once costumed or decorated, which is marked by gunshots- *ntu n’ala* (now, he is a representation of both the ancestors of the land, and the living) becomes agile, filled with superlative energy, but he is often restrained by his guards who also wield their brooms to scare people from coming closer to the masquerade. He starts his impersonation or physical representation of the ancestors right from the moment he dons the masquerade paraphernalia or costume.

The mask is the king of costumes in Ekpe Ikwuano, because masking is the process through which the mask exists. There is a need to highlight the differences between both of them. Ekpe Ikwuano masquerade drama can also be called Ekpe Ikwuano masking. This is because the masquerade plays the most important function during the festival. Masking is the festival.

Masking refers to all the masquerade performances in Igbo land and other areas with similar performances. Mask and masking are so related in such a way that both of them cannot be separated, and they play very prominent roles in traditional Igbo dramatic performances. It is mainly for the significance and popularity of mask, that it has become a synecdoche. In this case, masking is formed from mask. Ossie Onuora Enekwe writes on masking as follows:

> *Masking is the most popular, the most versatile, and the most entertaining public performance in Igboland. From the religious point of view, a mask has the force of an invocation and introduces extra-human forces into the human sphere, making possible the displacement of chronological time by primordial time in which mythical beings commune with the living and manifest their powers. From the aesthetic point of view, masking is a synthesis of many art forms, including costuming, impersonation, miming, sculpture, music, dance, poetry, movement, dialogue and painting. In*

*masking, ''the active potentiality of the image'' is made possible through motion.(56)*

For Enekwe who considers masking " the soul of the Igbo theatre", the Igbo conceive of a mask (sometimes called Mmonwu, Odo, Omabe, Ekpe, etc., since there are many traditions of masking) as the incarnation of the dead ancestors who continue to take an active interest in the affairs of their living descendants and relations. Their appearance at festivals as well as during other periods of the farming year is a manifestation of the general well- being and prosperity of the community. (56)

Enekwe makes us to understand that masking reigns supreme in Igbo land. Masking brings the physical life into the spiritual life, or vice versa. Masking involves many art forms such as impersonation, dialogue, music, dance, poetry, and many more. The Igbo sees a mask as a reflection or incarnation of the ancestors who continue to associate with their living descendants and relations. In this case, Mmonwu, Odo, Omabe, Ekpe, etc., are the various traditions of masking considered as the soul of the Igbo theatre.

The above listed traditions of masking are the various types of drama in Igbo land which are seen during festivals and also during other periods of the farming year. For example, the Ekpe Ikwuano is performed during the beginning of the farming year for the good and prosperity of the land. Also, it is performed at the burials of the heroes who brought honour to their people and contributed greatly to the development of the land, to show solidarity with the families of such deceased heroes.

The Ekpe Ikwuano masquerade drama is used during such burial period to invoke the spirit of the dead heroes to participate in the performance that glorifies adventure, exploits, and enterprise. The Ekpe Ikwuano performance is the greatest honour given to a dead hero in Ikwuano land. The performance here brings alive the virtues of the dead hero as good examples for the living. This enlivens the hearts of the bereaved family in such a way that the family begins to see the death of the hero as an experience devoid of sorrow and mourning, which are jettisoned in the process .

**Make-Up**

The make-up of the performance is part of the costume. It refers to the substances used by the chief actor and other performers to look different from their normal looks. The make-up is used as substance of disguise by the performers to achieve a particular goal. The performers apply *nzu* - white clay on their bodies as signs of purity, joy or happiness and hospitality for the strangers that would come from far and near to watch the masquerade drama. But it is not every performer that does this. There are some who apply black, red, green, blue, substances on their bodies to look different.

White clay is also used to rub on the chief actor's back hand, towards the fingers as part of the ritual process.The kindred with the traditional mandate for this, brings out one person from amongst them, especially an elderly man who performs this ritual. Blessings are also declared for progression and successful outing, mixed with the pronouncement of the four Igbo (market) days of Eke, Orie, Afo, and Nkwo for all-round protection. The elderly man, who is now a priest in his own right will further pour libation in this regard. It is also a belief amongst the people that the white clay rubbed on the fingers of the chief actor helps him to behead the goat successfully.

**Props**

Props are also part of the costumes of the Ekpe Ikwuano. They refer to the objects used by the performers during the Ekpe Ikwuano masquerade drama. Kola nut(s) is a very essential prop used by the performers. Kola nut is used for traditional prayers for the successful performance of the masquerade. The masquerade would be present during the presentation and blessing of the kola, with alcoholic drinks, especially schnapps. Then they would be shared

amongst the elders and the masquerade's crew.

The sharp machete for cutting off the goat's head is one of the most essential props of the drama. The machete is sharpened by the use of *Igbogiri*, a local whetting stone which helps bring out its maximum sharpness. The chief priest or a representative from his family comes to the square with the very sharp glinting machete hidden in sheath or folded wrapper, and hands the sharp machete over to the masquerade. Then, in the process of handing the machete to the masker, both men would first raise it together, in one grip for everyone to see and confirm before bringing it down together too, from where the masker performs his crucial function to the land.

Palm fronds are also used by some performers to show the sacredness of the performance. Palm fronds are also tied at the entrance points of the community celebrating the Ekpe festival. The palm frond is a totemic object which the people respect. Its use during the festival is sacrosanct. Tree branches or leaves are also used by some people to guard their drinking posts to ward off evil, or scare people who have come to the festival with evil intentions. The *Ojikarishi* tree is considered sacred and totemic by Ikwuano people. *Okpotoro* plant also plays similar roles as *Ojikarishi*. It is commonly positioned almost everywhere, and used to also ward off evil.

**Disguise**

The costume of disguise is very predominant in the performance. This starts with the chief actor who represents the ancestors as he wears the mask. He has disguised himself to become a different being. The disguise also takes its cue from the hunting experience where the warriors adopt all forms of disguise to deceive their preys and succeed. This is called camouflage in military parlance. The participants engage in all forms of disguise. This is done to instill fear in the minds of the people. Some carry *udu* - clay pots on their heads, stuffed with charcoal and other burning materials as the pots produce big smoke that fills the air. This creates awe and admiration amongst the people. Also, some males dress like females with lipsticks on their lips, artificial hair etc., and employ feminine behaviour. Some young girls imitate the outlook and behaviour of the boys. These go a very long way to create the needed entertainment and fun during the drama.

**Cast/Characterization**

This involves all the people who perform one role or the other during the Ekpe Ikwuano performance. The characterization portrays real characters who work for the good of the land. This starts from the chief actor, tail bearer or chief guard, guards, the griot or praise singer, instrumentalists, singers, and the participant audience. The various kindred responsible for different roles during the Ekpe are part of the characterization.

Characterization plays important role in every drama. In William Shakespeare's *Othello*, we see that the handkerchief given to Desdemona by *Othello* as a love token plays a very vital role in the play. Shakespeare utilizes this handkerchief to drive home his point. It creates a whole lot of drama between Othello, Lago, Cassio, and many others. The handkerchief symbolizes so much more than a mere token of love or affection. In fact, the handkerchief is the major source of the drama in Othello. In a similar vein, the goat or the beheading of the goat at one stroke of the machete is the drama in Ekpe Ikwuano. The other actions lead to the end product. The successful decapitation of the goat by the chief actor, is one of the activities that marks him as the most important character of the performance.

**Mime**

A mimetic element runs through the entire Ekpe Ikwuano masquerade drama. The whole actions of the chief actor are revealed through mime. He tries to copy or imitate the behaviour or appearance of the ancestors whom he is representing. While miming, he ceases to be an ordinary human and translates into a supernatural being. The movement of Ekpe Ikwuano masquerade is very symbolic and it further tells the story behind Ekpe Ikwuano, which

is the drama. The drama here is seen both in verbal action and in mime, and the major elements of drama are also achieved through them. The movement of the chief actor here imitates the head-hunting escapades, the level of power, and strength of the ancestors of the land. The chief actor sometimes crouches or bends to examine the situation of things around. He also crouches or bends to decapitate the goat's head. The movement indicates a necessary move to protect one from enemy attack during war and a good advantage to strike the enemy. It makes the warrior somehow invincible for attacks.

The fast and calculated movements of the chief actor is also symbolic. It shows the speed of the warriors (ancestors) in a battlefield. If the warrior is not fast and calculated he might be killed as a result of his laxity and weakness. This is why the chief actor is always agile and active. Also, sometimes he moves quickly, and another time he moves in a slow pace. These are the strategies employed in a battle field. The dancing movement of the chief actor is a re-enactment of the victorious dance of the ancestors after a successful outing. The ancestors celebrate their victory through the war dance. The war dance is also done before, during and after battle as a morale booster. This is why the chief actor performs the war dance after he dons the masquerade costume. It is an indication of a kick-start for war. He continues to perform the war dance prior to his decapitation of the goat's head, and even after the killing of the goat. The Ikwuano war dance runs throughout the duration of the Ekpe Ikwuano masquerade drama. However, there are other types of music, songs or dances which the chief actor performs in the course of his performance. These songs/dances have their different dimensions, patterns, and rhythms which the different musical instruments dictate.

**Dialogue and Diction**

Dialogue and diction are very important parts of the masquerade drama. The passage or dissemination of information makes a smooth running of the performance. In the case of Ekpe Ikwuano, there is a great communication between the songs and the chief actor.The praise-singer, who is also the song leader (especially in the sacred songs) and the griot,sing enticing and heroic songs alongside the other singers with instrumentalists to boost themorale of the chief actor. The songs serve as catalyst for his performance. The songs and dance which remind the chief actor of the exploits of his great forebears is the greatest dialogue of the Ekpe Ikwuano festival. Then the choice, way or manner, in which they are rendered, which is the diction, serves a perfect rendition for the occasion.

The chief actor acts according to the dictates of the tunes. In other words, he draws inspiration from them in his bid to save the land. The action of the chief priest communicating with the gods and ancestors of the land, and the blessing of the chief actor for a successful outing are also dialogue scenes. The chief priest, in the process of performing the rituals here, says:

*Agbara ndi anyi ji aba, ndi anyi ji eme onu. Ndiche abialam, abialam ooooh. Abum onye ozi unu. Ifea bu Ekpe nkei la ala aga igba ugbua! Gburu gburu ka-ala agba ukwu ose, adighi ari ya elu. Oko nkoo mmadu ogakwuru mmadu ibe ya, mana okoo anuohia o gakwuru osisi. Okwa unu ekwela eeeh! Rie nu! Nuo nu! Birikwanu oooh!*

--The gods that we are proud of. The ancestors I have come, I have come oh. I am your messenger. This is our own Ekpe that we are going to perform now! One can only go round the pepper plant, and not to climb it. When a human being wants to scratch he goes to his fellow human being, but when an animal wants to scratch, it goes to a tree. I hope you have agreed eeh! Eat! Drink! Live oh! (He pours libations and makes lots of incantations both in the form of speech and songs).

In the process of blessing the chief actor for a successful outing, he chants:

*Obu gi bu Ekpe ei! I ga aga, iga alota na udo. Ije a, ga agara gi nke oma. Ya dirigi la mma. Isee!*

—You are our Ekpe! You will go and come back peacefully. This journey shall be well with you. Let it be well with you. Isee! (He also pours libation for success).

The incantation here is part of the diction while what he says is the dialogue. An accompanying structure involves a scenario where the gods and ancestors speak or respond to the chief priest through some signs only he can understand. If the gods and ancestors do not approve the prayers or dialogue of the chief priest, the Ekpe Ikwuano would not be successful. But sometimes, the chief actor's sins or mistakes can lead to failure even when the gods have approved. Several other dialogue scenes exist. Libations, the canons, and musical instruments promote dialogue.

The dramatic elements in Ekpe Ikwuano masquerade drama are the plot structure or festival plot (climax, denouement, and visitation performance), song, dance, and display. Then, Proverb, the riddle, spectacle are also incorporated into the narrative part of the performance. The Ekpe Ikwuano is important to the society, for there are promotion of culture and tradition, enterprise, business and industry, peace and unity, healthy living/good life, adventure, recreation and leisure etc.

The Ekpe Ikwuano masquerade drama is primarily a didactic art. It is also designed to teach people many valuable things in the society such as the heritage, culture and tradition, respect, and moral lessons of life. The didactic features or tendencies of the Ekpe Ikwuano are seen almost in every part of the festival. Moral lessons abound in the songs too. The people rejoice once the sacrifice is done, and face the new farming season and their life affairs with a sense of fulfilment. The gods and ancestors too are pleased. By the successful performance of the chief actor, the didactic intentions or lessons here are courage, determination, doggedness, focus, and heroism, which are tools for progression or success in life. The message which is clear is that people should not relent in the face of difficulties or problems.

**Conclusion**

The Ekpe Ikwuano masquerade drama is rich and dynamic. The British could not stop this festival because an animal, not a human sacrifice was involved. The Indirect Rule system introduced by the British also helped to retain most of the cultural practices of the Anglophone African people. The Ikwuano people have continued to protect and project what their forebears left behind for posterity, one of such is the Ekpe Ikwuano festival, a sacrificial, didactic performance, and above all, a masquerade drama. This paper has shown that Ekpe Ikwuano is a masquerade drama, and has also given insights on the performance.

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