



## Masquerades in Africa: The Ebu Wonder

JUDE AZUKA ASENIME  
Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

**Abstract.** This paper studies the socio-cultural organizations in the African milieu with emphasis on the masquerade institution using the Ebu Wonder Masquerade Cult in Ebu community of Delta State, Nigeria, as a veritable example. In the African context, masquerades are believed to be ancestors who had returned from the world of the dead to the land of the living in order to watch over their loved ones. However, some believe that not all masquerades are spirits; they are only stage-managed by fun seeking individuals just for entertainment during festivities especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is on this premise that this study embarks on examining the origin, development and the nature of the Ebu Wonder Masquerade in the midst of the fact that distortion has crept into the institution due to supposed modernization. This it will do by employing the narrative and descriptive historical methods to analyse the data gathered from both primary (oral interview) within the subject area and secondary sources available on the subject. Thus, it was discovered that the Ebu Wonder Masquerade originated from the Igalaland, Middle belt of Nigeria, and has spiritual dynamics. This is such that before it performs, spiritual activities have to be carried out by its chief priest. More significantly, the masquerade appears to be a piece of cloth or mat on the floor before performance, but becomes as high as 50 feet during performance, and returns to its former state after performance.

**Keywords:** Ebu, Masquerade, Wonder, Origin, Cult.

### 1. Introduction

Masquerades and masquerading have remained major indices of the socio-cultural organization of a typical African and indeed, Nigerian organized community (Enedu, 2004). Masquerades, as believed in most

places, commonly represent ancestors who had returned to the land of the living to watch over those they left behind. They (masquerades) defended and safeguarded society and accordingly prevented all potent threats to their existence and that of related Institutions (Akubor, 2016). This is as Abdulkadir (1990) believes that throughout history, village ancestors (masquerades) performed the rites of transference and played a protective and regulatory role in the affairs of the living. Specifically, it governed the laws which were irrevocable and punishable by death.

In Igalaland, masquerades could be consulted for oath taking. If the gravity of the offence committed is high and defies possible human solution, the accused may go beyond swearing in the shrine. The traditionalist proceeds to present the masquerades before the accused for oath taking through which truth is determined and morality is enforced. Since oath is taken for exoneration or punishment, it has the function of deterring offenders and thereby reducing crime rate in the community (Adama, 2013).

Summarizing African masquerades from the Nigerian perspective, Akubor (2016) notes that:

*“...among the Esan, the Erinni (Elimin masquerades) are organic to their myth of creation. In this way, they function as the major stabiliser of people’s destiny. As far as the people are concerned, they are ancestral spirits who periodically visit their living forebears in masquerade forms. Their visits are regarded as spiritual interventions to the world of the living and as a result are highly venerated. They are a symbolic resurrection of the ancestors. To the Ifeku-Ibaji, Egwu (masquerade) symbolised both the ancestral shrine as well as represented the resurrected spirits of a dead elder, whose appearance and performance played a protective and regulatory role in the affairs of the living.*

*Specifically, it governed the laws which were irrevocable and punishable by death. In the Ejagham society of Cross River, the task of detecting witches and wizards rested with the Echi-Obasi-njom (the masquerade), it usually carried out this function in a wheeling, gliding dance organised by the society. Echi-Obasi-njom was usually accompanied by attendants as it swiftly moved round the settlement in search of witches and wizards in their hide outs. All over Yoruba land, the Egungun represent the spirit of the ancestors who have descended from heaven/mountains. It celebrates a period when the dead interact with the living, as it is their responsibility to compel the living to uphold the ethical standards of past generations.*

However, some are of the belief that not all masquerades are spirits, they are merely inspired by dreams (Imoukhede, 1991). Others believe they are merely made up costumes. Thus, describing the Nzam Wonder masquerade, Perani and Wolf posit that the masquerade is constructed with a bamboo frame that supports a long tube of white, fringed, strip-woven cloth that allows the encased dancer to elongate and collapse the tube with a stick, causing it to sway back and forth like another worldly apparition. They went on to say that it can see and move simultaneously in all directions while growing in height to around fifteen feet before suddenly collapsing (Madukasi, 2020). According to Onah (2004), masquerades are people wearing mask, strongly believed to impersonate brave people (men) who should have passed away long ago. In some cases however, masquerades may also be seen as representing important totemic animals.

In the African context, masquerades perform a number of functions that make them to be dreaded and revered in most cases. For instance, Igala masquerades are mechanisms of social control and are effective in the elimination or control of aberrant or unacceptable behaviour (Sergent, 1988). *Ajamalede* masquerade could detect any social ills in the society without information. If any stolen property is presented to them or is kept at a place they coincidentally visit, they do not hesitate to voice it out immediately (Amade & Atule, 2009). It exposes and disciplines thieves, fornicators, indolent and naughty people, and sorcerers, men who are diabolical, girls and women who are wayward, murderers and any act capable of tarnishing the image of Igala community. It does these to people through physical confrontation. It also rebukes erring members of the society, calling out their names, warning and cursing them publicly. Ebu, a typical

Igala community, is not exempted from this socio-cultural institution and norm.

### 1.1 Geo-History of Ebu

Ebu is a community in Oshimili South Local Government Area of Delta State of Nigeria. It is a distinct Igala speaking community located in the western side of River Niger in the sense that it is surrounded by Igbo speaking groups comprising of Illah, Ezi, Ukala–Okwuta, Onitsha-Olona, Issele–Uku, Issele-Ikpitime and so on (Asenime, 2015:1). It has an estimated population of about fifteen thousand (15,000) and an area of about 123 square kilometers (Okoja and Asenime, 2014). Ebu is bounded in the North by Illah, in the East, by Illushi, in the West by Ukala-Okwuta in the South by Ezi. It lies on latitude of 06.52 and 06.28 North-East of Ubiaja (Edo State) and Longitude 06.35 and 06.29 North–East of Ogwashi–Uku (Asenime, 2015).

The socio-cultural aspect of the people included festivities which could be sports related, the coronations of a new king, or the burial of a chief or prominent leader. There also exist festivals such as the Ubi festival, the annual new yam festival known as the Utu festival, and so on. Notable among the activities in these occasions is the performance of masquerades to the thrills of the people in attendance.

One of the masquerades in Ebu community is the Dancing Masquerade particularly known as the ‘Ebu Wonder’ and by implication, has attracted global attention to Ebu community, Nigeria at large and the wider Africa.

This paper is thus geared towards tracing the history of this masquerade, why it is referred to as Ebu Wonder, the significance of the masquerade to Ebu people and the neighbouring peoples. However, there was a people before the socio-cultural institution that brought the masquerade to the fore. Thus, the origin of the Ebu people will receive adequate attention.

### 1.2 Traditions of Origin

It is instructive to note that most of the cultural heritages (political organization, socio-cultural institutions) of Ebu people tilt towards that of the Igala. Chief among these aspects of culture is language, which is the basic element that defines a people. Thus, Atanda (1980:2) succinctly puts it that language is one of the basic determinants in considering ethnic group’s identity because it is the means of communication of which when it is lacking the corporate existence and separate identity of such an ethnic group become impossible.

More so, the Ebu traditional belief system and masquerade institution have a lot of similarities with that of Igala. For instance, the Ebu, like the Igala, believe in life after death and in the active participation of the departed ancestors in all of the activities of their erstwhile community. The reappearance of the ancestor in the physical world to participate symbolically in the affairs of the community is what the Igala demonstrates by 'Egungun' (masquerade) which is replicated in Ebu. Bradbury (1970:260) thus avers that among the Yoruba people, the Egungun demonstrates both ethical and moral behaviours of the people, exposing the strengths and weaknesses of the community with the hopes of encouraging behaviours more fitting of their descendants. This is as Olomola (2000:60-63) notes that Egungun symbolized the totality and ways of life of Ado people and exhibits the best in their aesthetics. Achebe (1992:122) on the anthropological dimension of the traditions of masquerading presents the Igbo perception of the Egwugwu (Egungun) as the presence of the dead ancestors that must be revered and feared.

In an oral interview, Ogedoh (an Ebu chief), giving account of these similarities explained that:

*There are some aspects of our traditions which have been copied from the Igala people, especially the masquerade thing. The Igala people are very good masquerade dancers and we have always had this relationship. As a result, our people often cross to these places to learn and come back here to display the dances. When we sing masquerade songs we sing in Igala.*

The above account shows that the Igala people have always had effective influence on Ebu people which can be seen in the striking similarities in language, masquerade institutions, traditional beliefs in the metaphysical and their belief in Ojo (God). At such, the masquerade institution represented by the Ebu Wonder will be examined subsequently.

### 1.3 Origin of Ebu Wonder

The Ebu Wonder, which belongs to an exclusive secret cult known as the 'Iya Afiteju', is a dancing masquerade considered to be an important feature in the social life of the Ebu people of Delta state. The masquerade revolves around entertainment and culture preservation and has attracted global recognition to Ebu community. It impresses its audience by its incredible display of magical feats and its ability to manifest into different sizes. For instance, it could be as flat as a mat and at the next instance, as tall as an Iroko tree. The Wonder is regarded by observers as intriguing, mysterious and

is dreaded with awe. What astonishes most people about the masquerade is that it is essentially a piece of cloth woken up with a gunshot from the box where it is kept; at that instance, it becomes as tall as 20 feet. After its performance, it deflates and returns to being just a piece of cloth.

The masquerade has attracted tourists to the Ebu community which in turn boosts trade and commerce in the community. A great number of Ebu sons and daughters and even those in diaspora come home just to see the masquerade in action. The masquerade literally transforms the serene scene of village life to a commercial hub driving swam of tourists, researchers, fun seekers, business people to Ebu. The masquerade has also been invited by several dignitaries within and without the shores of Ebu to perform at social events which include special occasions such as the coronation of new kings and death of prominent individuals. Like so many masquerade secret societies in Africa, the origin of the Ebu wonder masquerade cult is shrouded in mystery.

One account claims that the Ebu wonder was inspired by dreams. The purported founder, Onome, claimed to have had dreams where the masquerade appeared and taught him some dance steps. When he woke up, he told his people about these dreams and selected about twenty men who he taught these dance steps. Thus, the Ebu wonder masquerade cult was birthed (Interview with Okagidi).

In another light, one of the earliest members of the Wonder cult strongly believes that the Ebu wonder masquerade society was founded in the early 1960's. According to this account, during the funeral of an illustrious daughter of Ebu, her son brought a group of masquerades from Iguedo in Anambra state to perform. The displays of this group intrigued the people of Ebu, the king of Uchebe then selected about twenty agile young men to follow the group back to Iguedo in order to learn and master the arts and intricacies of the wonder dance (Interview with Ajalama).

However, it is believed that the masquerade cult diffused from Igala, through the Ibaji area into a boundary community, Nzam, in northern part of Anambra State. This is based on the fact that the Igala people also have a similar masquerade which is called Akwujune. This masquerade has similar characteristics with the Nzam Wonder and the Ebu Wonder. The Igala relations with the people within the Niger-Benue Confluence area as a result of trade, migration and other factors suffice the origin of the

Ebu Wonder to Igala. Thus, it becomes safe to state that the Ebu Wonder was cloned from the Akwujune masquerade of the Igala people. It should also be noted that the Ebu Wonder masquerade began in Uchebe before it spread to the other villages in Ebu.

## 2. Description

The Ebu Wonder is one of the tallest masquerades in the history of African masking tradition. It is usually brought in a box by the members of the cult and towers as high as 50 feet when performing. Its performance is triggered when a gunshot is fired into the air as the members of the cult chant some incantations and play some musical instruments

which include four-drums [Okoga], flute [Oja] and wooden clapper [Aja-Oja] while the spectators watch as the masquerade begins to grow rapidly to the sky.

Onwuejeogwu (1981:91) asserts that the musicians are all members of the masquerades -minimal lineage. During the outing ceremony, the performers usually sum up the progress of the previous year with the drums, praise the wonder masquerade and wish everybody well. Echezona (1963) argues that the masquerade does not come out to dance unless his royal drums invite it; then it appears with his drummers dancing and chanting while the excited crowds cheer for joy.



**Fig. 1** The Ebu Wonder in action



**Fig. 2** Ebu Wonder in action



**Fig. 3:** the Nzam Wonder in Action.

*Source: Madukasi, 2020*

### 3. Doctrine of the Ebu Wonder Masquerade Cult

The masquerade cult is not open to all as a result of some of the intricacies surrounding it. Traditionally, it is a sacred institution that requires high level of spiritual, emotional and physical discipline before one could be initiated into its system. For one, its members are essentially men; women have been excluded from sharing in the secrets of the cult for they are considered to be weak and fickle, and at such, are therefore not fit to take part in them. It is believed that any meeting between a woman and the masquerade would have adverse effects on both parties. More harm would come to the woman and the masquerade would lose something regarding its mystery. This is in similitude with the Nzam Wonder masquerade, where a pregnant woman is forbidden to see the masquerade in order not to jeopardize her safe delivery (Madukasi: 123). Apart from this fear, there is the desire to avert the wrath of the spirits whose visit to mankind in the form of masquerades is a great honour, which must not be abused. They are mindful of the fact, in their belief, that these ancestral spirits are superior to mere mortals and constitute an unusual phenomenon when they assume physical forms (Ude :74).

The process of initiation into the masquerade cult differs in villages, but one central theme is that the initiates who are usually males of certain age limit are made to undergo cleansing. After the initiation, the men are subjected to an oath of secrecy since they are not allowed to disclose the mystery surrounding the Ebu Wonder Cult to anyone especially women. Failure to keep these secrets has its consequences which includes mysterious illness or death.

Non-initiates are not allowed to enter the shrine of the Ebu Wonder; they are also barred from partaking in any sacrifice offered to the masquerade. When the Ebu Wonder masquerade is performing non-initiates are not allowed to enter into its circle, if they do so

they would be made to pay a fine as pronounced by the priest. The fine could be in form of a live goat or huge sum of money. Initiates of the Ebu Wonder cult should not be seen with their follow member's wife in a compromising position as this attracts a heavy fine.

A major high point of the masquerade doctrine was the ban on video cameras. Whilst the masquerade approaches the festival grounds, all cameras are announced to be switched off as tradition forbids anyone from taking the pictures of the Wonder. This was because any attempt to do that will render that device non-functional. However, the opposite is what obtains today as people are allowed to take pictures of the masquerade from afar.

The Ebu Wonder masquerade cult is seen as sacred and powerful, highly revered and dreaded. There is a general belief that the Ebu Wonder is a spirit in physical manifestation. For the Wonder masquerade to appear, the leader of the group has to pray to the ancestors, libation of palm wine is poured and messages of supplication sent to the ancestors. Then an invocation leads to the emergence of the spirit, a similar ritual is carried out that enables the spirit return peacefully to its abode after performance (Interview with Ajalama).

### 4. Administration of the Ebu Wonder Masquerade Cult

#### 4.1 Atama

Atama is the head of the masquerade cult. He has a lot of spiritual powers acquired through sorcery and herbal art. He is the chief priest of the Ebu Wonder shrine. He gives protective cover against spiritual attacks from witches and other demonic forces that are believed to hover around the scene of performance. This is why as the chief priest of the Ebu Wonder cult he usually engages in a lot of

divinations, sacrifices and rituals virtually on a daily basis throughout the year. The Atama is seen as the physical supreme essence representing all other unseen supportive spiritual forces that the masquerade may possess. All other members of the masquerade cult take instructions from him.

#### 4.2 Ogah

The Ogah comprises of two able bodied young men who are in charge of the entertainment of the masquerade cult. They provide refreshment for the members. The Ogah are usually the youngest members and act as messengers of the Atama. When it is time for meetings and social outings, they go out to inform the other members of the time, date and venue of these meetings. They ensure that the outing of the masquerade is a success.

#### 4.3 Itah

These are able bodied men who have been tested in warfare. They are also said to possess metaphysical powers. In action, their presence can send fright down the spine of non-initiates. Their main duty is to maintain law and order and to protect all participants and spectators; they attack and eject from the scene of performance, any foreign or obstructing elements. They are usually made up of four members. The Itahs usually join forces with the Atama to provide protective cover during performances such that while the Atama takes charge of the spiritual realm, the Itahs handle the physical as the masquerade performs.

#### 4.4 Club Members

This club is made up of the ex-Atamas. The scope of membership and activities include different age grades. They do not necessarily carry out serious functions, but their input is very much valued in the masquerade cult. They act like members of the jury when other members are being tried in the masquerade cult (Interview with Okoka).

### 5. Conclusion

The paper essentially discussed the socio-cultural milieu of the Ebu people of Delta State, Nigeria as represented by the Ebu Wonder Masquerade Cult. It started out with an in-depth description of the geographical location of the Ebu people. And as it is clear that there cannot be a king without a kingdom, it went ahead to trace the origin of the people to Igala with sufficient evidence. This is in response to the watery controversy surrounding the origin of the Ebu people where it has been claimed that the people

came elsewhere other than Igala. The settlement pattern of the people was also not left untouched.

More importantly, the work delved into the Ebu Wonder Masquerade Cult which represents a sizeable aspect of the people's socio-cultural life. Thus, it traced the origin of the masquerade cult to Igala. Though there is an account that traced its origin to the present Anambra State east of the Niger, evidence suffices that this later account does not hold water, rather, all the available evidence point towards the direction of Igala.

Furthermore, the study described how, where and when the Ebu wonder itself performs. It also unveiled most of the initiation processes into the masquerade cult; who is eligible to be a member and who is not, and why. It also enumerated the administrative structure of the cult and their individual responsibilities before, during and after the performance of the Ebu Wonder, emphasizing that while some of these roles are spiritual, others are physical.

The Ebu Wonder has over time, become a means of identification for the people of Ebu of Delta State such that anywhere and at any level one mentions they are from Ebu, the next thing that comes to mind is 'Ebu Wonder'. However, the spiritual relevance of the masquerade is fast fading into the whims and caprices of 21<sup>st</sup> century modernization.

For instance, in the similitude of the Nzam Wonder masquerade, where a pregnant woman is forbidden to see the masquerade in order to guarantee her safe delivery; before now, it was forbidden to take the photograph of the Ebu Wonder, as any attempt to do that will render that device non-functional, but the opposite is what obtains today. Also, the members of the cult are now using it as a money making adventure where the mystical and intriguing performance of the Ebu Wonder masquerade has been relegated to a mere source of social entertainment within Ebu and its environs.

### References

- Abdulkadir, M. S., (1990). *An Economic History of Igalaland 1896-1939*. (PhD Thesis), Bayero University, Kano.
- Achebe C., (1992). *Things Fall Apart*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.
- Adama, T., (2013). Igala Masquerades as Agent of Moral and Social Transformation. *Bassey Andah Journal*, vol. 6.

- Akubor, E. O., (2016). "Africans Concept of Masquerades and Their Role in Societal Control and Stability: Some Notes on the Esan People of Southern Nigeria". *Asian and African Studies*, 25(1).
- Amade, A. and Atule, E. E., (2009). "The Concept of Masquerade in Igala Land: A Paradigm for Good Governance". In A.O Edegbo (Ed.) *Education, Good Governance and Challenges of Nationhood in Nigeria*. Lagos: Samtrade.
- Asenime J., (2015). "The Emergence of an Igala Group in the Lower Niger Region: A Case Study of the Ebu People 1600- 1800" *Academia.Edu*.
- Atanda J.A., (1980). "The Historian and the Problems of Origins of Peoples in Nigerian Society". *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 10(3).
- Bradbury R.E., (1970). *The Benin Kingdom and Edo Speaking People of Southern Nigeria*, Wightman Mountain.
- Echezona, W.W.C., (1963). "Ibo Musical Instruments". *Music Educators Journal*, 50 (5).
- Enedu M., (2004). "The Nature of the African Masquerade In Performance" *A Journal of Humanities*, Vol. 2
- Imoukhede F.A.I.G., (1991). "A Handbook of Nigerian Culture". *The Department of Culture, Federal Ministry of Culture and Social Welfare*.
- Interview with Chief Ogedoh, Ebu, June 20, 2021.
- Interview with Chief Ojogu Azuka Ajalama (founding member of the Ebu Wonder Masquerade Cult), Ebu, July 30, 2021
- Interview with Mr Ben Athigbi, Ebu, June 20, 2021
- Interview with Mr. Eddy Agbooma, Warri, June 21, 2021.
- Interview with Ochei Johnson, Ebu, June 20, 2021.
- Interview with Pa Okagidi, Ebu, July 30, 2021.
- Interview with Pa Okoka, 75, Member of the Ebu Wonder Dance Group, Ebu, March 14, 2015.
- Madukasi, F. C., (2020). "Chanting the Wonder Masquerade: Projecting Secrecy; Magic And Medicine in African Traditional Religion Among the Nzam People of Igbo Origin". *International Journal of Innovative Research and Advanced Studies (IJIRAS)*, 7(1).
- Mordi E.N. and Opone P.O., (2009). "Origins and Migrations of the Enuani People of South Central Nigeria". *Academia.edu*.
- Okoja A.O.S. and Asenime O.A., (2014). "A Strategic Brief on Ebu Community." *An Annual Conference of Ebu Development Union*.
- Olomola I., (2000). "The Decline of Traditional Deities; A Case Study of Egungun Ado." *New Series*, Vol. 40.
- Onah, R. C., (2004). *Experiences of Traditional Custom and Religion: An Igbo Example*. Nsukka: Chuka Educational Publisher.
- Onwuejeogwu, M. A., (1981). *An Igbo Civilization: Nri Kingdom and Hegemony*. London: Ethnographica Ltd.
- Sargent, R. A., (1988). "Dynastic History and a Face of the Nation". In I. K. Sidney (Ed.) *West African Masks and Cultural System*.
- Ude K. A., (), *Manhood And Religion: A Study of Initiation Rites in Some Igbo Speaking Communities in Nigeria*.