

# DESIGN CONCEPT AND CHARACTERIZATION IN SELECT IGBO MASQUERADES

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## ***Abstract***

*The study of the concepts and motifs in Igbo masquerade design requires an adequate knowledge of the traditional society from and for which the masquerades are created. This knowledge entails an understanding of the worldview of the society that gave it birth. In other words, the Igbo masquerade phenomenon is better understood through an analysis of the concept of mmonwu in Igbo cosmology both as spirit manifests and a performance art. The problem of this study therefore is to interrogate the design concepts and motifs in select Igbo masquerades through which they are characterized and identified. Through an analysis of the design concepts and motifs in Anuka, Agboghommuo, Ajikwu and Ijele masquerades respectively, the study finds that Igbo masquerades are characterized and identified through the nature of their designs and the philosophy through which they are conceptualized. It thus submits that the Igbo masquerade phenomenon is not fortuitous rather it is an art that encapsulates the Igbo philosophy and worldview. The study therefore recommends the study and analysis of Igbo masquerade designs and motifs as a means of deepening the understanding of the art which understanding will further position the art in global performance space.*

## **Introduction**

The Igbo masquerade art is seen as an eloquent expression of the people's philosophy and worldview being a phenomenon that is borne out of the Igbo belief in the continued presence of the ancestors in the affairs of the living as well as the co-existence of the three worlds of the living, the dead and the unborn. Hence early

scholars and researchers into the Igbo masquerade art have variously described it as "... a manifestation or concretization of the spirits of particular dead ancestors ..." (Ugonna 2); "... 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 by means of ritual and magic" (Enekwe 56); "a physical and abstract creation of man in order to comprehend his world better as he approximates the spirit of dead ancestors and gods" (Embu 55); "a visitation of the spirits of the dead to their late familiar haunts..." (Basden 235); "... a spirit being who is essentially no stranger in Igbo cosmos" (Okoye "Costume in Traditional Igbo Masquerade" 3); "... ancestral spirits personified by maskers who appear in public at seasoned periods..." (Arinze 18); "... manifestations from the spirit realm of the ancestors and other disembodied beings seeking communication with mortals" (Asigbo 2).

It follows therefore that the Igbo masquerade art is the people's mode of concretizing the abstract concept of some ancestral spirit beings and gods which activities have some direct relationship with the living. Consequently, these spirit concepts are closely related to the environment of their creation.

Igbo masquerades are thus known and identified by the nature of the designs that characterize their masks, headdresses, costumes and even properties. In other words, in spite of the fact that they are generally called *mmuo* or *mmonwu*, each individual masquerade is characterized by the peculiarity of its mask or headdress. Yet, within the general classification of these classes of masquerades further specific identifications are made through the specificity of the respective masks or headdresses. For instance, the *Anuka*, one of the masquerades under study is within the broad specie of the *Agaba* masquerade family but its identification is made obvious through the peculiarities of its design concept. Similarly, in the design concept for *Agboghommuo*, (a dancing maiden mask), each individual mask is made unique through the

specificity of a motif or symbol for ease of identification amongst other maiden masks. Equally, the *Ajikwu*, (another specie of dancing masquerade), the concept of its design not only aids identification but helps in its performance.

The implication of the uniqueness of the design concepts for individual masquerades is that it is the designs that give them identity and further determine the nature of their performances. In other words, every concept gives each masquerade its character and consequently, an identity. These concepts are what determine the functions and purposes for the creation of any masquerade. In fact, it is through the designs that the utilitarian nature of the Igbo masquerade is contemplated and ascertained. The design concepts make the masquerades readily identifiable according to their roles in the society because they;

... strive to touch various facets of society needs and aspirations. They can be categorized based on its utility such as fulfillment of religious rites, promotion of traditional institutions, encouraging respect for constituted authorities, promotion of ethical values and pious life, And condemnation of vices that erode the foundation of the society. (Ndubuisi n.p)

It follows therefore that while these masquerades are designed to entertain, they perform more utilitarian functions than mere spectacle. Thus, beyond the entertainment provided by the masquerade, it performs significant social and religious roles in the community. Therefore, as a consequence of associating the designs with the functions of each masquerade their respective performances are also in line with the nature of the designs. This means that the masquerade designs help situate the Igbo *mmonwu* phenomenon within the confines of what Catherine McDermott describes as “Folk Art” (109) because in addition to the aesthetic

appreciation of masks as artistic creations the designs bear cultural evidences of the people's past and present realities as it concerns their worldview.

This is exemplified in the fact that beyond the collaboration of different artists in the making/creation of a masquerade, the art is specifically designed for performance and this is where the Igbo masquerade phenomenon differs from the plastic art. The masquerade art can therefore be seen as a process where the design/creation “permit simultaneous input from different perspectives...” (McDermott 140). In a creation/building of a masquerade therefore is found the job of a sculptor, a carver, a costumer a choreographer and so on. However, the performative aspect of the masquerade sets it apart from other Igbo arts. For instance, a performance of a typical *Agboghommuo* masquerade will require the performer or masker, who is the centre of attraction; then there are other masquerades that accompany the *mmonwu* such as the *Mmuo Polisi* and *Onuku*, then the musicians who are the human characters that form the orchestra.

Conversely, just as the design and concept for an individual masquerade directly affects its performance so also does the demand(s) of the performance inform the character of the potential masker. For example, a lot of training and rehearsals is required from the performers (masker and orchestra) in the performance of an *Agboghommuo* masquerade where the performer is usually a highly skilled dancer with a flexible body as he will be impersonating a female character. Likewise, the potential maskers for the *Ajikwu* should be a skilled dancer thus long periods are spent in learning the stunts and movements of the masquerade. But, in the performance of masquerades like *Anuka* and *Ijele*, such amount of skill in dancing is not required. For the *Anuka* and other energetic species of masquerades emphasis is on the masker's physical strength and agility unlike with the *Agboghommuo* where emphasis is on adroit dancing skills. The *Ijele* on the other hand, does not need so much dexterity in its dances but requires one with courage

and strength to carry the massive structure and exhibit the regal steps and ginger movements in rhythm with the music.

In the design and performance of the Igbo masquerade therefore is found a purposeful intent at representing an idea or concept that is culturally identifiable within a community or group. For instance; the *Anuka* masquerade is designed to portray the restlessness of youth and in its performance is seen the aggression and agility of youth. The intent is to show that a community that has agile youths is productive and protected and to prove and exhibit the resourcefulness that is expected of young men at that stage in life. Whereas for the *Agboghommuo* and *Ajikwu*; designs are aimed at showcasing the rich cultures of the Igbo in dance and art. This exhibition of Igbo art and craft can equally be said of the *Ijele* in its concept and design.

The design of each individual masquerade thus determines the nature of the accompanying music because a masquerade cannot perform independent of its music and the musicians in turn must perform in accordance to the central movements of the performing masquerade. For instance, the *Anuka* performs to the rhythm of the *Ogene*. The *Ogene* (a metallic gong) is known in Igbo cosmology as a musical instrument for the strong and the brave, especially the two-pronged ones (*Ogene Mkpınabo*). Hence, it is a popular saying among the Igbo that “*Ogene adi edu onye ujo*” (The *Ogene* Music does not lead the coward). So, while the *Anuka* prances about, the musicians control its movement with the *Ogene* music as there is a call and response in its composition. But, the music and orchestra that accompanies the *Agboghommuo* and *Ajikwu* is melodious hence it elicits the dexterous dances from the masquerade and the *Ijele* is led by the *Igba Eze* (King’s Music) which is regal befitting the nature and characteristic of the masquerade.

Similarly, the concept and subsequent design of Igbo masquerade affects audience’s response to the performance of the masquerade. According to Ossie Enekwe, such responses could be “a burst of applause, accompanied by cat calls, ululations, solo

dancing or acrobatic displays, which were performed by the audience as a way of expressing their joy and support” (86). These responses vary according to the type and function of each masquerade. For instance, spectators watching the performance of an *Anuka* is always cagey as the masquerade, though strictly under guard by its human escorts, can wreak havoc at any bystander if not properly controlled. However, in the performance of a dancing masquerade like *Agboghomuo* and *Ajikwu* the audience literally embraces the *mmonwu* as it performs and the attendants (both human and ‘spirit’) usually find it difficult to control the crowd.

Thus, for the masquerade design process to be complete there must be the presence of an audience who are actively involved in its appreciation and interpretation in performance. Such appreciation is highly influenced by the conceptual mask design which gives the masquerade its character and performative identity.

## **Design Concepts and Characterization in Some Igbo Masquerade Theatres:**

### **The *Anuka***

The *Anuka* masquerade is in the family of the forceful and restive types. It is a form of the *Agaba* mask. The masquerade under reference here is as conceived and performed by the Umuoka Age Grade of Olioba Quarters of Umudioka town in Dunukofia Local Government Area of Anambra State. The headdress is designed to cover the entire head of the masker thus its size is bigger than an average human head. The headdress stands at a height of about 36” with a diameter of 24”. It is carved from the *Okwe* tree which is a light but tough wood that is not eaten by warts or easily affected by the weather.

The *Anuka* headpiece is an exaggerated and stylized version of a bull’s head with horns and bulging eyes. On the headdress are both human and animal motifs and the idea behind the conceptualization of the design is to portray a strong and vibrant

image of the active youth symbolized by the bull. It "... represents and symbolizes authority, dominance, forcefulness, influence and might". (Ononome and Egwali 141) The masquerade commands an aura of fear and power. It is believed to be fearless and is reputed to possess great physical strength like the bull/ram which it exemplifies. The design of the *Anuka* masquerade is expressionistic because it is "characterized by an exaggeration of the materials, colours, outline or textures of objects in order to heighten the emotional impact" (McDermott 104). Thus, the animal features on the headpiece are stylized and exaggerated so also are the human features such as the eyes and the teeth.

The resilient fabric with which the costume is built is a testimonial to the nature of the tenacity, power and force behind the masquerade. The *Anuka* possesses warrior-like prowess and moves with giant strides. The wooden spoon blades that are appliquéd on the costume jingle as it moves thereby warning the audience passers-by of the approaching danger. It brandishes a sharp machete with which it is supposed to cut down any opponent it meets on its way. The concept of the *Anuka* as a very forceful masquerade is encapsulated in one of its songs;

*Umuoka tili mmonwu; Igbo n'aba n'eme* (the *Umuoka* Age Grade has a masquerade the Igbo boasts and does what they say)

### **The *Agboghommuo***

This is a female mask created to represent the quintessential Igbo female. It demonstrates feminine characteristics and moves with the grace and poise of an average female and in performance, "their dances represent the community's appreciation of beauty, drama, dance, music and arts" (Okpoko and Okonkwo qtd in Ikegwu 108). Similarly Chinyere Okafor states that "in performance, *Agbogho-mmuo* tries to epitomize societal views of feminine personality: communal, moral, good form and features, nurturing, gentle, vigorous and dynamic". (*Global Encounters ...* 33)

The *Agboghommuo* specie of masquerade comes in a variety of designs, some are designed to wear face masks (see plate 3) while others are conceived to adorn headdresses (See Fig 4). For this study, the *Agboghommuo* type is the one that adorns the face mask and it is as conceived by the Uke Community in Idemmili North Local Government of Anambra State. The wooden mask is painted a light pink with glossy surface. The eyes are designed with black eye liners and the mouth is often painted red. The nose is designed to be straight and pointed. The head carries black curls representing traditional Igbo maiden plaited hair.



fig 1: *Agboghommuo* headdress.



Fig 2: *Agboghommou* face mask

The costume, which is usually a skirt and blouse, comes in multi-colours of red, mauve, yellow, green, blue and white. It complements its costume with white polyester gloves to cover the fingers and black tights to cover the legs and a pair of white stockings to conceal the toes. This is usually designed to be tight-fitting so that it can hug the body and accentuate the feminine contours. The design of the *Agboghommuo* mask is midway between naturalism and expressionism because there is a conscious effort by the designer to approximate the natural characteristics of the quintessential Igbo female while at the same time exaggerating those salient feminine attribute through the application of motifs and symbols that delineate the Igbo concept of beauty, grace and feminine poise.

The *Agboghommuo* mask is deftly decorated with black patterned designs which are pointers to the Uli designs. The Uli design is “a traditional motif commonly used among the Igbo

women of Eastern part of Nigeria for decorations” (Ndubuisi and Irokanulo 280). The light colour of the face is naturally associated with the Igbo female. Indeed, “for the Igbo, whiteness is associated with coolness, control and benevolence, and is often considered a female attribute” (Cole and Aniakor 121) In fact, the whiteness denotes ghostly appearance as masked characters are believed to be spirit incarnates. It also stands for female beauty and purity. Chinyere Okafor opines that “the light color and the immobility of the face reflect her other worldly, awe inspiring nature” (“Beyond the Inscrutable Wonder...” 45). This is because, traditionally, the Igbo models of feminine beauty are based on both physical and moral dimensions. On the physical plane; a girl is supposed to be tall and slender, with a long neck accentuated with full and pointed breasts, light complexion and small features. The hair should be long and crested with facial tattoos made with *Uli* dye. These physical features are believed to be a reflection of the unseen spiritual traits which the average Igbo male desires in a female: purity, as represented by the body complexion, grace as seen in the facial features and the manner the spirit performs. Hence, the design of the mask and costume help define and reinforce the character of the masquerade especially in performance. Furthermore, Okafor explains that the *Agboghommuo* “walks slowly and gently, swaying her buttocks and swinging her arms to the rhythm of her body in a characteristically feminine manner” (“Beyond the Inscrutable...” 46).

### **The Ijele**

This masquerade is said to be the king of all masquerades because of its enormous size and the symbols and motifs on its expansive headdress The *Ijele* therefore embodies the opulence, grandeur and ramifications of Igbo visual and performing arts. The *Ijele* masquerade under study here is as conceived and performed by the Nteje community in Oyi Local Government Area of Anambra State. On its headdress are artistic representations and

symbols that depict the everyday life of the Igbo as well as the past and present encounters with other cultures and traditions. In fact, to the Igbo, the *Ijele* mask is a microcosm of the universe for it has on its headdress both human and spirit symbols. Artists that build the *Ijele* masquerade achieve this feat through what has been described in design parlance as “Assemblage” (McDermott 24). This is a technique that combines two-dimensional materials and images and three-dimensional forms and object to create a pleasing work of art. Hence, the design of the *Ijele* super-structure is said to be an “appropriation” (McDermott 15) wherein existing images from other cultures are borrowed to create a new art object. Thus Richard Henderson has associated the *Ijele* masquerade with kings and whatever a king stands for among the Igbo. According to him, *Ijele* stands for “the stately grandeur of a person who has attained a honoured position in life and in extension, the splendour, the fullness of life, and the great economic success of the king and his chiefs” (qtd in Enekwe 103).

The *Ijele*, unlike other masquerades perform to a unique stately music that is slow and majestic. Thus when one is seen to have his head in the clouds, the Igbo will say that *o na aga ije Ijele* (He is walking/ moving like an *Ijele* ). The masquerade is therefore noted for its calculated movements. It neither hurries nor runs. Its most spectacular action is the spin which raises tension in the audience because of its size. It follows therefore that the character of the *Ijele* is unique and very different from that of any other masquerade. In fact, the closest in size and structure to the *Ijele* is the *Akwunachenyi* mask. Still, the *Ijele* commands more respect than the *Akwunachenyi* because nothing as yet compares with the *Ijele* in size. This is why the *Ijele* is considered a communal masquerade and can only be created and performed by an entire village or kindred, unlike other masquerades. According to Enekwe “what the *Ijele* dramatizes ... is the concept of state, in which the king leads and the rest of the people follows” (103). The implication therefore, is that like the king in human world, the *Ijele*

does not perform simultaneously with any other masquerade except of course, the *Mmuo Polisi*, which merely stands on the sidelines and serves as both escort and body guard.

In characterization therefore, the masquerade moves with regal gait to the tune of the *Igba Eze* (king's music) which is a unique melodious music that is slow and accompanied by both human and "spirit" escorts.

The mysticism surrounding the *Ijele* can be deciphered from its concept as having originated from the water. This explains why there is a symbol of the python at the base of the superstructure. This, according to Chief Walter Uzodigwe of Nteje, a masker and mask builder is a direct pointer to the fact that the *Ijele* is a water spirit. There is also an image of a female who it is believed represents the water goddess. Hence, the *Ijele* is conceived as an embodiment of the Igbo worldview because the numerous motifs and symbols that adorn its expansive headdress represent the Igbo philosophy.

### **The *Ajikwu***

This masquerade, as has been stated earlier, moves in an ensemble. Its nature and design is that of a spirit orchestra. Its original concept was that of a night masquerade because according to mythology the *Ajikwu* is a dreaded spirit being that moves about at night. However, since all night masquerades are associated with magic and spell in order to avert the disasters that occur to women and the uninitiated who peep during *Ajikwu* night performances, masks were created for the masquerade and it eventually became a day time masquerade that entertains.

The *Ajikwu* ensemble as performed by the Akwa community of Ifitedunu town in Dunukofia Local Government Area of Anambra State consists of Seven Masquerades (*Onefuu*, *Onukamma* (the singing duo), and the dancing quartet of *Eliza*, *Obuteaku*, *Ugo* and *Agnes*. The *Onefuu* (Onlooker) is the custodian

of everything the *Ajikwu* ensemble stands for. To the casual spectator, *Onefuu* is an unserious character as its mask is fashioned in the manner of the jester, *Onuku*, but in reality, it is the custodian of the masquerade. *Onefuu* is designed as a comic mask and it does perform some comic stunts like standing with a spectator without the person's knowledge but its main purpose and function is to blaze the trail for the entire ensemble and to ensure the safety of the troupe. The nature of its design is therefore deceptive as it is designed to distract the attention of any one, man or spirit, who might think evil of the group.



Fig. 3: *Onefuu* mask



Fig. 4: *Onukamma* mask

*Onukamma*, the singing duo, has a headdress designed to produce sound. As the duo sings with the aid of the “spider”, (the cylindrical hollow reed that gives the masquerade’s voice its guttural timbre), the headdress helps in amplifying the sound so that the audience can hear the songs without the technological support of microphones and speakers. The *Onukamma* headdress is made from the *Okwe* wood with cylindrical poles from the raffia palm (*Ofolo ngwo*). These midribs of the raffia boost acoustics and serve as resonators during a performance in an open area, as a greater number of persons in the audience can hear the songs.

The dancing foursome, *Obute Aku*, (Bringer of wealth) Elizabeth, *Ugo* (Beautiful as the Eagle) and Agnes wear masks made from the *Okwe* wood that resemble pretty damsels which attract audience members to the masquerade. The *Ajanape* (the

wing-like structure at the back) is designed as a propeller. This attachment is made from the cane tree. It is spiral in shape with an outer covering made of local mat laced with raffia. This serves a dual purpose: firstly, it is used as a weapon to clear the arena for a performance. This means that the *Ajikwu* uses the *Ajanape* as a whip, when spectators begin to close in on it. This happens when the masquerade moves its shoulder both ways, the *ajanape* swings in the air and its beat is very painful. Secondly, the *ajanape*, as mentioned earlier, serves as a springboard for the masquerade's stunts. This is because, in performance *Ajikwu* is reputed for its summersaults and ascents and descents from great heights. The *ajanape* is therefore used to enhance this feat.

### **Motifs in Masquerade Art**

Motifs are recurrent patterns and symbols on Igbo masquerade masks, headdresses and costume. They lend aesthetics to the designs of these cultural artefacts but most importantly they bear cultural significations to the identities of the masquerades on whose designs they are superimposed. In other words, the motifs on Igbo masquerades are of extreme utilitarian value as they are signifiers to the people's cosmic ideologies. Each masquerade motif therefore is an expression of the socio-spiritual belief of the Igbo. The use of these symbols on masquerade designs is therefore a way of establishing the fact that the masquerade cult is exclusive, this has made it difficult for the casual observer to decode the esoteric motifs and symbols on the masks and costumes of most masquerades. These motifs in addition to their significations help enhance the characterization of the masquerades; they aid in situating a masquerade within a specific cultural area as well as serving as trade mark for the respective artist(s) that build them.

### **The Anuka**

On the *Anuka* headdress are motifs of animal and human symbols. Prominent on the headdress is the leopard motif and the

bull's horns. This leopard symbolizes courage and sends out danger signals to any would be opponent. Thus, like the leopard in the wild which is reputed for its exploits and massacre of other animals, the *Anuka* symbolizes the aggression and strength of youth. The *Anuka* is reputed for making daring charges that reflect vigour and mysticism. This action is called *ikpa ike* (flagrant display of excess power) in Igbo parlance. Consequently, in its performance, it moves with great agility and its human escort that controls its movement is always seen trotting after it in a bid to catch up with its near supernatural strength.



Fig. 5: Anuka Headpiece (Front view)



Fig. 6: Anuka Headpiece (Profile)

The horns, on the other hand, represent strength. Animals with horns like bull, ram and buffalo are known for their forage with their horns as seen in this traditional rhyme; *kweke kweke... ebunu ji isi eje ogu* (*kweke, kweke*, the ram goes to a fight head on). They fight their ways through any form of obstacle. Therefore, the horns on the *Anuka* headdress is an expression of its inestimable strength. It goes to show that the Igbo youth is brave and ever relentless in his quest for wealth, knowledge and fame.

The horns on the *Anuka* headdress are equally symbolic due to its number; Four (4). The number four (4) in Igbo cosmology stands for the traditional market week. *Eke, Oye, Afor, Nkwo*. It is also a belief among the Igbo, especially in the breaking of kola nuts, that a kola nut that has four lobes is good omen. Thus, the horns on the headdress, although the masquerade is dreaded due to what it

stands for, are an indication and a prayer that the Igbo youth will ever progress. It signifies that the Igbo will live throughout the season like the tomorrow that never ends.

Another motif on the *Anuka* is an effigy of plastic baby doll. This symbolizes procreation. It is a testimonial that the spirit of the dead as manifested in the masquerade is in transition to yet another beginning thereby lending credence to the continuous belief in the three worlds of the living, the dead and the unborn. According to Chinyere Okafor, “in traditional African society, the techniques, the extrinsic characteristics that combine to depict the form and mystical aura of drama, include music, mask, costume, dance, movement, gesture, and metaphysical elements”. (“Beyond the Inscrutable...” 40). Thus, the *Anuka* as a youthful masquerade represents, as shown in its motif, a transition from what was, (the child), through what is, (the youth), to what will be (the adult) and even that which is yet to come (the unborn).

These motifs are arranged in proper composition on the headdress to ensure balance. The effigies are at equidistance from each other such that in full light, the masquerade cannot be seen to be tilting to one side. Similarly, the horns are composed to give symmetrical balance to the carved headdress and the entire mass of the masked figure.

### **The *Agboghommuo***

This maiden masked spirit is one of the most colourful masquerades among the Igbo. Its brilliant colours and the beauty of its dance performances underscore the aesthetics behind the concept of the masquerade. Although the masker is usually a male, the mask is believed to “depict feminine ideas and behaviour” (Okafor “Global Encounters... 40”). This means that it is an artist’s interpretation of the virtues of a woman. Indeed, in all intents and purposes, the design for the *Agboghommuo* mask and costume aptly depicts all the peculiarities of the feminine gender.



Fig. 7: *Agbohommuo* facemask (Front view) Fig. 8: Profile of *Agbohommuo* mask

The motifs on the face mask are partly derived from the *Nsibidi* and *Uli* designs which have symbols of the child, tree, music, birds and so on. These are however more pronounced on the costume. The costume is usually brilliantly multi-coloured. Green, white, yellow, red, purple and orange are prominent colours on the *Agbohommuo* costume. These colours are arranged in different shapes that give a visual order, creating a rhythmic impression which is played out in the dance. Usually the dance begins with slow movements and gathers momentum as the music increases in tempo.

The tiny mirrors that are applied on the costume are indications of the vain nature of the average female. In fact, the *Agbohommuo* costume is always complemented with a multi-coloured circular hand fan with a tiny stem and a circular mirror built into the centre of the hand fan. Thus, in the midst of its performance, the masquerade usually pauses to play the coy mistress by looking at itself in the mirror and adjusting one or two strands of hair while making gestures of one making up her face. Metaphorically, the *Agbohommuo* mask designs and its performance can be seen to constitute a satiric attack on vain-glorious, beauty-conscious and flirtatious young women.

## The *Ijele*

This monumental masquerade carries on its headdress motifs that symbolize many things to the Igbo. Chukwuma Ozochi notes that the motifs on the *Ijele* headdress are “metaphorical because they show or reveal the life of the Igbo people in all its complexities” (43). Similarly, Chinyere Okafor observes that:

The word “*Ijele*” is not just a masking nomenclature, but has become a metaphor for greatness. Some women take the *Ijele* title which is a public acknowledgment of their superior beauty, in the sense of achievement and status through economic wealth, social success, wisdom and intelligence just as the *Ijele* mask is superior in the masking arena (43)

The *Ijele* thus embodies the summation of Igbo cosmology in their conception of the world and its relationships. On its expansive headdress are motifs that speak of both abstract and concrete concepts. These motifs in turn inform the nature of the masquerade’s performance. Hence, the high point of an *Ijele* performance is its spin. It is believed that since the masquerade is spherical and performs in an arena where the spectators are positioned around it, to undertake the circular movement is to ensure that every member of the audience sees and experiences every aspect of the designs and motifs with which the costume and headdress are composed of. Thus, “amid the tassels, mirrors and flowers on *Ijele*’s ‘branches’ are numerous sculpted figures of human, animal and other masks – a virtual catalogue of the Igbo and their world” (Gilberts 441).

Prominent on the *Ijele* is the python motif (*Eke*) that is at the base of the headdress. Ozochi reports that “... one may find a giant python enfolding itself at the base of the superstructure. This suggests that the *Ijele* has the power of the river which goddess the python represents” (46).

This motif symbolizes the belief that the masquerade is closely linked to the maiden water spirit. This fact is complemented by the image of a feminine figure that stands for the face of the *Ijele*. Chief Walter Uzodigwe of Umuefi Nteje, in an interview explains that the *Ijele* derives its powers from the water. Again, the python motif shows the reverence associated with the *Ijele* masquerade. Python (*Eke*) is one of the sacred animals in the areas where the masquerade operates. There is also a mythological link between the python and the creation of the world in Igbo cosmology. Thus, Chinua Achebe is reported by Chinyere Ogbu (460) as having documented that the python in Igbo cosmology “is that pillar of water that links the earth and the firmament”. The python is also considered as “king” or “lord” of the forest, hence the Igbo phrase “*Eke nwe offia*” (python, the lord of the forest). This also symbolizes the supremacy of the *Ijele* in the world of masquerades.

Other motifs on the *Ijele* headdress are effigies of masquerades and people from different climes and associations. The inclusion of the masquerades’ motifs on the *Ijele* design shows that it is the king of all other masquerades thus according to Chief Uzodigwe, they are called “*Umummuo Ijele*”. (*Ijele*’s spirit children). The human motifs represent people from different cultures as well as those in various professions. These amply explain that the *Ijele* is a microcosm of the world as conceived by the Igbo.

Furthermore, on the costume are human and animal motifs as well as other objects. These, like the motifs on the headdress symbolize the nature of the *Ijele* as an embodiment of a people’s customs and beliefs. The *Nsibidi* and *Uli* motifs are more pronounced on the *Ijele* than on any other masquerade where they are applied.



Fig 9 *Ijele* Motifs: Fig 9: *Uli* designs

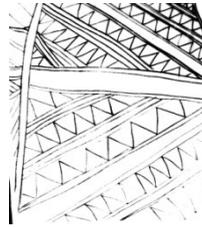


Fig 10 *Mbo Agu*

There is the *Mbo Agu* (leopard's claws), these are rendered in a rhythmic pattern to underscore the strength and agility of the masquerade despite the massive size. There is also the *Ogene* (metal gong) and the *Ekwe* (wooden gong) motifs. These symbolize both the artistic prowess of the *Ijele* masquerade and the performance idiom associated with its movement. It goes further to show that the Igbo are versed in the use of these cultural nuances as reflected in musical instruments. The *Ijele* motifs are rendered in multiple colours to show variety and composition in design. There are six prominent colours on the *Ijele* costume design; Green, White, Red, Black, Yellow and Blue. The number six (6) according to Chief Uzodigwe is symbolic. It stands for balance, proportion and variety. This further explains the reason why the *Ijele* is rarely seen to have fallen while in performance.

There is also the motif of '*aka onu*' (Gold chain). This simply symbolizes the greatness of the wealth associated with the *Ijele*. It also signifies that like the gold which is not worn to every occasion, the *Ijele* is not a masquerade that performs at every occasion. In fact, the performance or outing of an *Ijele* can be likened to the proverbial *Ugo* (Eagle) which the Igbo says "*Anya fulu Ugo nulia na adi afu Ugo kwa daa*" (the eye that beholds the Eagle should rejoice because, the Eagle is not a bird you see every day.) Indeed, some *Ijele* mask designs usually have the image or brass model of an eagle at the peak of its dome, in line with the Igbo cultural metaphors associated with the eagle: strength, vision, peculiarity, rarity, leadership and regal disposition.

## The *Ajikwu*

This mask ensemble appears in simple multi-coloured fabric with a face mask, except for the singing duo that wears headdresses. The designs appear plain yet beneath the surface simplicity are underlying meanings that can be deciphered from the hand properties that complement the costumes. For instance, the dancing quartet carry gourd rattles (*Ichaka*) or maracas. This musical instrument is used to indicate the nature of each individual masquerade performance hence while the four wear the same face mask and appear identical, their respective performances tell them apart.

Similarly, the singing duo, *Onukamma*, complement their costume with *Ogene* (metal gong). These give rhythm and embellish the percussion that is produced by the accompanying human escorts. In addition to the *ichaka* that the dancing masquerades use to dictate the dance steps, the *ogene* supplies the rhythmic balance to the movements. On the headdress of *Onukamma* are motifs that symbolize the xylophone. These give resonance and timbre to the music supplied by the entire orchestra.



Fig 11: *Ajikwu* dancing mask (front view)



Fig 12: Profile view of *Ajikwu* mask

The *Onefuu* on its own part goes with either a fresh palm frond (*omu*) or a kitchen knife (*mma ekwu*) these totems symbolize peace and war respectively. However, the totem with which it moves for any particular outing is determined after some divinations. There is also the egg of the local fowl which is usually

smashed as a symbol of *ofo* (authority) that the entire ensemble holds against any opposition.

Amidst the respective motifs on each individual mask is the design of the waist cloth (*mbenukwu*). This is a strip of raffia tied round the waist to accentuate the waist line and give the masquerade balance. On the waist of the *Ajikwu* also, is found the *Igba ego* and *Uberu*. The *Uberu* is a multi-coloured strip of cotton fabric used to embellish the sombre colours of the raffia. It has four colours; white, green, yellow and red. These, according to Chief Obiadada, in an interview, are symbols: white stands for purity; green stands for fertility and to show the Nigerian origin, yellow signifies unity and red means that there is no danger associated with the masquerade's performance.

The *Igba ego* is designed with cowries and there is a motif of a cross in the centre of this costume item. The cross according to Chief Nwandu in an oral interview signifies that the *Ajikwu* is neither cultic nor a heathen affair and that is the reason why Christians take part in its activities. In other words, the cross motif symbolizes acculturation, aesthetic dynamism and an appropriation of cultural items from different lands including their religious symbol of worship. Similarly, the naming of two of the dancing quartets Agnes and Eliza respectively point to the fact that the Igbo has had encounters with Western culture.

## **Conclusion**

This study into the nature and characteristics of Igbo masquerade design concepts and motifs have proven that the masquerade phenomenon among the Igbo is a sincere representation of the philosophy and worldview especially as it concerns the people's believe in the relationship between the three worlds of the living, the dead and the unborn. This also buttresses the concept of the belief in the life after death as the masquerade is seen as the manifestation of the spirit of the dead in concrete terms. The nature of the masquerade designs and the attendant motifs through which

respective masquerades are identified and which also defines the nature of each individual masquerade's performance show that the conceptualization of Igbo masquerade designs is not a fortuitous venture rather it is a process born out of deep thought and serious community/societal considerations. This is because these concepts and motifs reflect the Igbo notion of their environment as well as their encounters with other peoples and cultures.

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