

## Poignant Poetics: The Aesthetics of Igbo Mask Chants

By

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### **Abstract**

*The Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria are an ethnic group known for their many and culturally rich traditions. The mask or mm̄nw̄ cult, one of these traditions, is a haloed institution among the Igbo. The masks are regarded as ancestral spirits that visit the land of the living periodically in order to commune, direct and intervene where necessary, in human affairs. These masks play numerous roles of which chanting words and poems of wisdom and entertainment in a sort of dramatic performance could function as either a means to an end or an end in itself. This paper through the context-based pragmatic analysis theoretical framework method examines these chants and finds them laden with aesthetic elements which are functional, entertaining and satisfying as any poetic performance or verse could be.*

### **Introduction: The Igbo**

The Igbo are one of the major ethnic groups that make up Nigeria; alongside Hausa and Yoruba. They inhabit the south-eastern part of the country and are bordered by the Igala to the North, Bini and Isoko to the West, and Ibibio, Efik, etc., to the south. Much of the Igbo land lies in the tropical rain forest belt east of the River Niger, while a little lies west of it nearer the Bini people.

The Igbo are known for their mostly patriarchal societies and their uniquely decentralized system of government where the role and post of absolute monarch is more or less non-existent. Their rich culture and traditional heritage also panders towards male dominated affairs where the majority of the most feared, revered, and influential institutions are mostly controlled and operated by men. In families, before the heightened dominance of Christianity, the *ofọ* is seen as the symbol of authority on which during communal sacrifices at family shrines, blood of sacrificial animals is spilled. Men carry this *ofọ* as family heads and leaders.

The institution of *okpala* as clan leader, existence of *Nzena* *Ozọ* prestigious societies, age groups (all for males), the all-female *umụada* societies, etc. are all amongst the operative ambits of the Igbo cultural ontology, *omenani*, in order to control, pilot and guide the day to day existence of the Igbo. They are principally institutions of tradition, law and order. But this group of institutions could not have been complete without including the often dreaded and haloed mask cult: the *mmonwu*/*mmanwu* or *mmuo* institution.

## **Masks among the Igbo**

The Igbo mask cult is basically male-dominated and operated. There could be vague and isolated cases of female involvement in some obscure part of the Igbo, but that is not the interest of this paper. One of the major functions of the mask tradition and institution is entertainment but it is also well known as a traditional Igbo arm for the maintenance of law and order. Many parts of the Igbo have different names, roles, concepts and projections about and for the mask concept but common denominators such as fear, reverence, and excitement run across the length and breadth of the different parts of the Igbo. This simply means that whether we are accosted by or interested in the northern Igbo *mmṛnwu*, *mmanwu*, *mmuṛ* etc., or the Nsukka area *odo*, *omabe*, etc., or the South-West riverine *owu*, *okorosha*, etc., or the *ekpe*, *ekpo*, *okonko*, etc., of the Bende and Ngwa areas near the Cross-River region, we are dealing with a sacrosanct and feared ancestral entity of the Igbo (*The Dead Among the Living* 15).

Masks almost always entertain by performing. Their performances are regarded as traditional Igbo theatre. The sight of a masquerade performance is always an interesting and awe-inspiring sight to behold. According to Chike Okoye in his *the Mmṛnwu Theatre: Igbo Poetry of the Spirits*,

The kinetics and mnemonics that accompany the drama, the emphatic movements to and fro, the forward dashes and abrupt stops, the affirmative nods and disagreeing shakes of the head, The dignified show-spins, the dance

steps and the mainstream chants... are part of the mask's dance drama.(5)

Depending on the variations of a particular Igbo culture area, the mask performance could be solely drama with poetry or narrative playing a supportive and secondary role; or it could be an Igbo area where the poetry or chant takes precedence while the body movement becomes the supportive drama of sorts to actuate poetry in motion. This paper is more interested in the aspect where the mask chants are the central focus of the mm̄nw̄ performance.

For the Igbo of the Awka-Nri-Agulu-Ekwulobia-Arondizuogu axis, the chants or narratives of the mask are the focal points of its performances. The body movements serve to explicate, accentuate and emphasize the narratives. The sacrosanct and haloed reverence with which these parts of Igbo hold the mm̄nw̄ is because it is regarded as, to quote Ugonna's *M̄nw̄: A Dramatic Tradition of the Igbo*,

- (a) A mask with the supernatural powers regarded as  
a visible spirit in the community and accorded all  
spiritual awe and respect.
- (b) A spirit coming from the underground in a  
masked form;...

- (c) An age –old form of mask supposed to come to  
man’s world from the spirit world.(2)

This view imbues the mask with the roles of elder, ancestor, sage, etc., whose wisdom once voiced should be digested and adhered to. According to Okoye, “As an aspect of oral tradition, the mask tradition has within its fold, parts and branches that are storehouses of proverbial literature, unique poetry and idiomatic expressions which have remained incidentally oral...”(6). These make the mask utterances very important for the positive development of the Igbo psyche and polity.

### **Poetics, Aesthetics, Chants, and Analyses**

Poetics broadly concerns the theories of literary forms and literary discourse. But here, we are more interested in Jonathan Culler’s description of poetics in his *LiteraryTheory: A VeryShortIntroduction* where he says that

Poetics is distinguished from hermeneutics by  
its focus

not on the meaning of a text, but rather is  
understanding

of how a text’s different elements come  
together and

produce certain effects on the reader.  
(emphasis mine)

Again, *The Encyclopedia of Poetics* lends credence to this strand of poetics:

The aim of *Poetics* (is)...to move audiences...  
'to discover

how a poem, produced by imitation and  
representing

some aspect of a natural object – its form – in  
the art-

official medium of poetry, may so achieve  
perfection of

that art form in the medium that the desired  
aesthetic

effect results.'

As for the 'aesthetic effect', Aristotle is  
obviously aware

of the issue, since the *Poetics* discusses the  
effects of

tragedy on the emotions of the audience. (934)

Meanwhile, according to M H Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Alexander Baumgarten's description of aesthetics in his Latin treatise *Aesthetica*, as 'the aesthetic end is the perfection of sensuous cognition, as

such; this is beauty', lends credence to its modern usage as designating 'the systematic study of all fine arts, as well as of the nature of beauty in any object, whether natural or artificial' (3); and this is germane to our present study of Igbo mask chants.

There are many categories of masks across Igboland. The major functions of these masks vary as a result of the immediate contextual needs of and the original intent of the mask owners - the community. Nevertheless, no matter how macabre, fantastic, bland, repulsive or weird a mask might appear, there is always an element of spectacle bordering more or less on entertainment surrounding its essence and presence.

As was hinted earlier, certain parts of the Igbo prefer masks that are more physically expressive than vocally narrative; while for some parts, dramatic masks count as nothing if they do not indulge in guttural chants of poetic narratives known as the *mbem*. Mbem among the Igbo is the general name for chants and poetry. *Mbem mmṛnwu* is used to refer to mask or masquerade chants. Mbem mmṛnwu is poetic; and is often in verse. It has all the qualities and features of traditional, oral, Igbo poetry. Summarizing Emeka Nwabueze's point in his "The Aesthetics of Narrative in Igbo Masquerade Drama", the mbem contains the encrypted form of the Igbo essence, portrayed in rhythmical lines of verse (87). Like all good poetic renditions and forms, the mbem mmṛnwu is like the proverbial dry meat that fills the mouth because it takes considerable time to unravel and never fails to awe

the audience with lasting revelations of further vistas of meaning.

Poignancy, in addition to its natural and original meaning will assume a contextual profundity when applied to the Igbo chants of the spirits - mbem. Because of Igbo ontology, the import of liminal and ancestral invocations, vocalizations and interventions are immensely felt and held in high esteem; even when entertaining. The concept of *dulceetutile* finds a neat fit in the Igbo mask paradigm because as the chants entertain and please the audience, potent words of advice and chastisement also fall into place and get heeded. Surely, to be delighted and reprimanded by the spirits must be a wonderful experience.

The poignancy is more felt when one is an initiate of the mask cult. This is because mask speech and chants often manifest in varying meta-language levels, mostly codified and encrypted for the benefit of a select few (especially initiates) who literally nod in comprehension and appreciation as the mask's genius and wisdom in the chants unravel.

Chanting masks speak. They speak to people through guttural chants mostly codified but generally intelligible to the majority of the populace. The chants (mbem) could be satire, lampoon, praise, self-praise etc ( "The Aesthetic of Narrative" 93); and could also adopt boastful, arrogant, challenging, daring, warning, guiding, advising, chastising, etc, tones in the rendition. The chants are rendered in a drawled, sing-song, reedy, unearthly tone



accentuated by a pipe-like contraption worn over the mouth. This gives the speech a rasping and unearthly edge and makes it sound more ominously ancestral.

The tonal nature of Igbo language affects the mbem and imbues it with a conspicuous rhythm that is characterized by 'lines' marked out by breath-pauses or breath-groups. This understanding is based on the observation that the chanter pauses for breath at the end of a group of utterances. These utterances are the line of Igbo mbem. Interestingly, just as English poetic prosody contains feet within meter, so does the Igbo mask mbem contain *igidi* in the breath-pause. Again, according to Okoye, "...the Igbo experience and apply tone-terracing...a notion that Igbo speech and verse features a gradual downward slope in pitch towards the end of articulation of a line" (118). This means that there is a conspicuously rhythmical diminuendo effect experienced at the last syllables of an mbem line. This contributes to heightening the ominous spirit-ancestor effect.

Sample chants from masks belonging to Agulu and Arondiziogu communities of the Igbo, who are known fairly well as proud and respected practitioners of the masquerade institution, will be represented here and aesthetics highlighted. Odogwuanyammee, Okwuanyịonụ and Akịka-ata-Okwu masks will be used.

### **Odogwuanyammee**

The Odogwuanyammee name literally translates as "(the) red-eyed brave". The title suits this Arondizuogu mask because of its exploits that mostly border on derring-do. The mask is believed to be very fetish and steeped in dark

magic and charms. It likes to regard itself as invincible. It is a single mask often accompanied by a staff carrying mask side-kick and a human troupe numbering between 8 and 12 who handle the musical instruments. The mask chants solo and where necessary, the human troupe provide choruses and refrains. Odogwuanyammee's chants are accompanied by melodious and rhythmical music dominated by bass tom-toms. The themes of its chants are often taunting, challenging, sanctimonious, self-righteous, heroic and sometimes ritualistic.

### **Igbo:**

- Mgbe m na-eje wee puta n'Ezinano  
Obu ekuo mwee nee anya nene Danda  
Danda wee gwaba m okwu  
Wee si na ya egbugo ichi n'ihu gbuo n'azu  
5 Wee dika dike na-adị ma o kwado agha.  
Na o buile oma ka ejule ji aga n'ogwu  
Na a na-eji ego akpa nzu  
Were nzu ewunyere ndi nwuru anwu  
Na o bu ndom ngha ka na-eji ejide agu di ndu  
10 Wee kee ya agbu  
Na nnwa m na-atili oyi na-agba okpa n'ogu  
-ka m mara kwa a mara  
Na o bu o nia ka eji a bu dike n'agha  
Ma na ihe na-eku ume na-anwu anwu  
15 -ka m kpachara anya  
Mgbe ahụ ka m ji nee anya n'ihu nee n'azu  
O nweghi onye m fulu  
M wee je were igbe eji e je ogu gbanye n'aka ikenga  
m:

Sị onye gbaa n'aka ikenga m  
20 O bụrụ ya ọnwụ  
Onye gbaa m n'aka ibite  
Uwa a dịrịya mma!

**English:**

When I came up to the four-road junction  
Discovery dawned, I looked it was Danda  
Danda started talking to me  
Saying he has scarified his face and his back  
5 And that he is now like a battle-ready warrior  
A sweet tongue sees the snail through thorns  
Money is spent in applying nzu  
And nzu is used in burying the dead.  
The perfect mist is used in capturing the tiger  
10 In order to tie it up  
For the kid unprotected against cold kicks the back  
-This I should know  
For steeling the heart makes a warrior in battle  
But every breathing thing is prone to death  
15 -That I be careful.  
That was when I looked in front and looked behind  
I did not see anyone  
I then took my war-bracelet and put on my Ikenga-  
hand:  
A foe on my Ikenga-hand  
20 Meets his death,  
But if one meets my left hand  
His world would be better!

The above mbem features aesthetic devices. Line 2 contains alliteration in “Discovery dawned...Danda”; while line 4 contains a symbolic extended synecdoche in

“scarified”. The process of making ritual or non-ritual cuts especially on the face is known as scarification; and in this context actually symbolizes fetish preparations with charms infused into the cuts. It then becomes both a symbol of magical preparedness and a synecdoche of the art itself. Line 6 is a proverb that has to do with the success potentials of smooth and efficient diplomacy in turbulent situations using the snail’s slippery ‘tongue’ movements that effectively guides it through thorns. Alliterations also appear in the line, “...sweet...sees...snail through thorns”. The line, “the perfect mist is used in capturing the tiger” is an aphorism. This probably underscores the importance of poor visibility playing in favour of the ferocious tiger’s captors. Another alliteration is in line 11; “...kid...cold kicks”. A proverb that emphasizes bravery appears in line 13; while an aphorism on the certainty of death for all living things is present in line 14. An effective caesura balances the effect of the antithesis that separates lines 19 and 20 on one hand, 21 and 22 on the other. Above serves for the literary devices in the verse. The next level is one which is context-dependent; which means only locals, and mostly the mask cult initiates can fully grasp the essential meanings behind the chant. The mbem is about the mask’s journey for rite and ritual purposes. It is a narrative poem; one in a series that depicts vividly the experiences of the mask on its quest. In the early parts, the mask meets Danda (a type of ant) and in a kind of dramatic monologue, gives Odogwuanyammee pieces of advice. The imagery of meeting a speaking and fetish ant is a metaphysical conception that underlines the mm̄nw̄’s supernatural and mystical dimensions. Interestingly, the Danda persona according to the lines, disappears the way it

appeared - without much ado. The mask at this juncture becomes more prepared and resolves to carry on ready to meet with both friends and foes.

### **Okwuanyịonu**

This is a mask whose name literarily means that the “mouth-that-will-not-tire-of-speech”. This mmọnwụ from Agulu prides itself to be a social gadfly, a commentator and reservoir of the wisdom of the forefathers. Always alone, with no musical or human accompaniment, it performs its chants either on demand or of its own volition. Its rendition of chants depends heavily on its tonal modulation of the rhythms of Igbo speech uttered in mid-tempo; in a sing-song manner somewhere between a song and slowly measured speech. This mode lends a grave and revered guttural quality to its chants. In varying lengths of independent verse, the mask brings forth vestiges of social commentary, admonitions, observations, advice, satiric pieces, lampoons, and self-praise.

### **Igbo:**

- Ụbọchị mụ na ụmụọkpụ nwere ikpe nwa m  
    Ineke wee chatọjuo m anya  
    A gwalụ m ndị nze na ọzọwee sị fa oo  
    Na okwu dị mma nze ataa ọjị  
5   Okwu adighị mma na nze ya ata ọjị  
Nya kpatara ndị nze ji anwụ ọnwụ ikwu  
    Ha wee tiesị na okwuanyịonu e kwuwaa ọnu  
    Na e ya-ekie agbụ oo  
    M kpọ ndị nze na ọzọ ha za m oo  
10 M we sị fa, ọ ka mụ na ụmụọkpụ wee

Kpebe ikpe mmṛnwu  
Onemgbe ka nke ahụ jiri bido n'ana Agulu?  
Ọ bụ n'ana na ọ bụ nsọ  
M si fa na o nwere okwu m m'ekwu oo  
15 M kwuchaa okwu, maka na inu ka Igbo ji eri okwu  
A na mekwu na ana m ebe o o  
Onye ọ bụna marakwa na  
Ajadu Adaziana anaghikwanu aṅu nkwu-enu aṅu  
Ihe m gwara ndi nzena ọzọ ụbọchi ahụ gboo gboo  
20 Ajadu Adaziana anaghikwanu aṅu nkwu-enu aṅu  
M si fa na Ajadu Adaziana were nka nṅo nkwu-enu  
aṅu o  
Igu a malụ were nka gbajisibe ọnu  
E were ha nka gbara efi ọsọ  
M chiri aworo nabara onwe m!

**English:**

The day I had a case with the womenfolk my son  
I got confounded with issues  
I spoke to the Nze na Ọzọ, telling them  
That in peacetimes they eat kola nuts  
5 That in troubled times they still eat kolanuts  
And that is why they die ignoble deaths  
They all shouted that Okwuanyionu has spoken the  
unspeakable  
That he should be trussed up.  
I called the Nze na Ọzọ and they answered me,  
10 I now said: should I drag an mmṛnwu case  
With the womenfolk?  
When did that trend start in Agulu?  
It is an abomination!  
I told them I had something to say

15 When I finish...because the Igbo eat speech with  
proverbs,

I am saying and I am crying out

That everyone should know that

The Adaziana widow does not drink up-wine...

This I told the Nze na Ozo on that day far back in  
time

20 That the Adaziana widow does not drink up-wine...

If the Adaziana widow tactfully drinks up-wine

Palm fronds will wither in protest!

They tactfully avoided the irate cow;

I gathered my scales and left!

The aesthetics of this verse lie in the fact that it is a narrative and didactic anecdote on the all-knowing infallibility of the mm̄nw̄u persona and institution; and in extension, wisdom of the ancestors. It also underscores the strictly non-participatory role of women among the mm̄nw̄umask tradition practitioners of the Igbo. Lines 4 and 5 contain an aphorism that describes the dishonesty and corrupt nature of the prestigious Nze na Ozo society, while lines 10, 11 and 12 feature a rhetorical question that underscores the non-participatory role of women in mm̄nw̄u. Line 16's repetition enhances emphasis in the same manner as lines 18 and 20. Line 22 is a metaphor of imagery concerning abomination and revolt while line 23's "irate cow" imagery is a metaphor for the mask and the traditions it represents. "Scales" in line 24 is part metonymy and part synecdoche; the former because it could represent the mask as an entity (a flaking one), or the latter because some parts of it actually look scaly.

**Akika-ata-Okwu**

Also an Agulu mask, it is similar to the Okwuanyịonu. Its name roughly translates to “speech defies termites”, which means that speech or the spoken word neither decays nor spoils not to talk of being prone to termite attacks. The effects and potency of the spoken word last almost forever. This mask also praises itself, warns deviants, miscreants and adversaries. It also comments wittily and satirically on social events and occurrences. Like the Okwuanyịonu, its verses are largely epigrammatic.

**Igbo:**

Ọ dika mụ gụlụ obodo  
Mụ gụlụ nwa  
Ọ dika mụ gụlụ nwarọbunagu  
Any a ọbula fụlụ ugo  
5 Nya jaa kenụ ugo daa  
Na anya adi afụ ugo kwadaa  
Nkili nkili ka a na-ekili ododo  
Si ejikwene ododo je nie ozu

**English:**

I have the urge to clutch the people  
And clutch the child;  
I have the urge to clutch the child-in-the-wild  
The eye that sights the eagle  
5 Let it hail the eagle always  
For the eyes seldom see the eagle  
You can only admire velvet  
It should not be used as a burial shroud.

The rhythm of the first three lines is unmistakable. The caesura occurring at the end of the first line enhances the



enjambment of lines 1 and 2; this also creates the balanced pause that spreads into the free sprung rhythm of line 3. The repetition of “clutch” in identical places in the threelines forms a medial rhyme, while the assonance of “child” in 2 and "child-in-the-wild” in 3 is musical.

Lines 3’s "child-in the-wild” is a descriptive personification for a spirit deity that is often situated in the wild where it prefers to inhabit. Lines 4, 5 and 6 contain a proverb that emphasizes the importance of making use of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, while 7 and 8 constitute an aphorism that advises on the suitability of objects or things for specific purposes.

## **Conclusion**

It is important to note here that after all said and done, a dry, abstract and paper document such as this will never come near in semblance to the real poetry-in-motion that themmṛnwu mask chant performance is. It is traditional African Igbo theatre where the ‘script’, audience, and setting are always dynamic; ever-changing in order to suit particular exigencies. Again, the descriptions of the performances, the reactions and participation of the audience, and the general atmosphere of the performance in a natural setting is better experienced first-hand than through any other means. Nevertheless, this paper has attempted to show that Igbo mbem mmṛnwu chants contain aesthetic elements that are interwoven into the kernel of traditional Igbo lore and norms that are important to the Igbo society and relevant even beyond. This position is nevertheless in cognizance of the fact that the translations available on paper remain so; for want of

a more apt medium in order to tackle the problems of loss of untranslatable indigenous expressions and nuances.

The Igbo mm̄nwu institution is a rich storehouse of traditional lore, customs, wisdom, etc.; and through the mbem chant of certain categories of masks, this orature of the ancients aesthetically adorned is continually re-enacted and re-adjusted to entertain, guide, and teach for the betterment of the society.

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