

From the Heart of Masculinity: Ogbodo- Uke Women's Masking

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Ogbodo-Uke is a mask performance that is organized and performed by women of the Izzi clan in Igboland of Nigeria. Amongst the Igbo, masking is the special prerogative of men who are entrusted to use it as a ritualistic instrument for approaching the unknown. Spirits emanate through the masks which are animated to function as agents of societal control and entertainment. Special women—such as post menopausal ones, wives of senior cult members, and lineage daughters—are often drafted to perform roles in the masking performance. However, they never function in the center of power by controlling the organization and wearing the mask. It was therefore innovative and extremely radical when the women of Izzi ventured into the masking domain. This paper examines the origins and performance of Ogbodo-Uke mask by women of Aba community of Abakiliki. It will be seen that:

1. Ogbodo-Uke originated from a masculinist society that classified masking as a male affair.
2. It is organized, produced, and performed by women.
3. It is a new phenomenon that is viewed with mixed feelings.
4. It is an expression of independence and gender cooperation.

Izzi is located in the northeastern part of Igboland. It shares its northern and northeastern boundaries with non-Igbo-speaking peoples of Benue and Cross River areas, respectively. The other boundaries are shared with other Igbo people. The clan is a cluster of communities in Abakiliki and Izzi administrative areas of Enugu State. The people trace their origin to a common male founder called Nnode. In the traditional communities, “labour

was limited to biological criteria” (Okonkwo 27). Duties were gender specific. To a very large extent, women’s roles revolved around their biological function. For example, they nurture the family by taking care of the feeding, clothing, and health of the inmates. Men are expected to provide the means through their control of the major cash crops, yam and rice. This kind of division of labor lends support to Anne-Marie Amherst’s theory of Neoteny. She posits that infants’ immaturity (neoteny) led to the division of labor along sex lines (57). In Izzi, the immaturity of the young and the dependence of family members on the care of women largely contributed to the assignment of women to the domestic sphere.

Izzi people have a number of festivals in their yearly cycle when they take out time from the routine of daily work to relax and enjoy. Such festivals include Okemini, Ugwudenyi, Ofia-Ukwu, Ugede, and Uke. One major attraction of festivals is masking, which is a prestigious assignment for men in Izzi¹ and Igboland in general. It is claimed that the exclusion of women from masking is as old as masking itself because the founding fathers of masking cults organized it that way (Okafor, “The Rejected Corner Stone” 27). Oral tradition, however, indicates that there might have been women’s masking that was eventually taken over by men.² Although such stories operate outside reality, in the imaginative realm, they might be pointers to a reality that has become remote or a reality that was feared and suppressed. As mentioned earlier, there is hardly any Igbo theater that does not utilize the services of women as mothers, cleaners, heralds, and choruses. The origin and development of the involvement of women in men’s mask cults are still obscure. This involvement should not be confused with official extension of membership of mask cults to women. Membership is officially open to men only. The few women who are incorporated because of the services they render hardly ever function in the organization and control of the cult activities. They never wear the mask and embody the spirit of the mask. The majority of women operate as non-initiates who are supposed to be ignorant of the masking process. They are, however, free to watch and even in some cases follow a mask that has been produced and is performing in the community.

The idea or suggestion of women producing a mask is believed to be alien to Izzi culture. The idea is so unbelievable that after the introduction of women’s masking cult, some men doggedly refuse to acknowledge it. The irate reaction of a male interviewee to my quest for the women maskers is informative:

No matter what happens, women can never wear mask in Izzi....
Madam, if you want people to tell you stories of the land, that is okay.
But if you want to look for women wearing masks, then forget it! It is not done! It is an abomination! In fact, if not that you are an educated woman, I will not be discussing masquerade with you. (Simon Ogbonna, Abakiliki, April 1992)

In addition to its obvious message, the speech shows that masking is such a prestigious manly activity that to associate it with women even at the

level of discussing it with a woman is demeaning. The speech illustrates the gender specificity of the famous masking activity. How, then, did women of Izzi cross the boundary of gender and enter the enclave of the indomitable traditions?

The seemingly rigid tradition contains the seed of development. The particular element of change that affected the masking tradition lies in the potency of women's power. In Izzi and much of Igboland in general, people believe in the power of women. An Ikwerre-Igbo novelist, Elechi Amadi, puts it succinctly when he states that, "Because man recognizes instinctively that feminine powers are overwhelming, he is reluctant to concede any further powers and privileges to women..." (Fido 225-26). The fear of this power is partly responsible for the exclusion of women from masking. Ironically, many mask cults seek to validate their existence by invoking the power of women as mothers.³ In times of distress, when the security of the community is threatened, women are often called upon to save the situation. The traditional ruler of Abakiliki, Igwe Alo, refers to this power:

In Izziland, when something becomes tough, women are called in as a final resort. There was once a dreadful spirit dwelling in a tree. It was causing havoc in the land. The people went to an oracle which proclaimed that only women could drive away the spirit. So, elderly women had to perform a ritual in the night. They went naked to the tree and defiled it. They spread feces and abused the bad spirit. That was how they defeated it and peace was restored to the land.... If there is a war between two communities, the men will be fighting and fighting. If women just decide to end the war, they will just carry live branches with leaves to the place of fighting and wave them. That will be the end of the battle. (20 March 1991)

The speech demonstrates belief in the potency of women's power in Izzi. The belief, however, is not peculiar to the Izzi-Igbo. Among the western Niger-Igbo people of Obankpa, the spiritual and physical health of the people is vested in the women. According to the female ruler, Omu,

If there is draught, we curse whoever caused it. If there is sickness and people are dying, my cabinet goes naked in the night with live branches to curse whoever brought it. If there is sickness in the next town, I do something with my cabinet to ensure that sickness does not enter this town. (qtd in Okonjo 50)

Among the neighboring Edo people, women are also the final resort in solving difficult problems. This belief was invoked in 1985 when the military government introduced high fees in schools even as massive retrenchment of workers was going on. The old women (*edede*) threatened to go naked on the streets. This ritualistic demonstration of anger was believed to have drastic consequences because of the ritual power of women. The military governor quickly addressed the issue on television and abolished the offensive school fees.

The ritualistic function of women emanated from belief in the ritual essence of women as progenitors of the society. The idea is that women

know the secret of life since they are the source of life. Because of their biological function in the live-giving process, the society looks on them to safeguard life. Thus, it is the biological role of women that influenced belief in their power. Ironically, the same progenitive force which gave them power is also the source of many of their problems. While women were usually tied to the private and domestic life with children, men tended to dominate public life. One agrees with Filomina Chioma Steady when she posits that

The birthplace of human life must also be the birthplace of human struggles, and feminist consciousness must in some way be related to the earliest division of labor according to sex on the continent. (7)

The origin of women's masking in Izzi is directly linked with the belief in women's progenitive powers. The emergency situation that called for the use of this power was the Nigeria-Biafra war, 1967-70. The war disrupted the traditional division of labor by gender. Women were recruited into the militia corps, Intelligence and Propaganda Directorates, as well as sections of the fighting zone (Mba 71). Many of those who were left in the rear acquired new responsibilities as a result of the absence of people who had been drafted into the army. In short, due to the exigencies of the war, women took up new challenges, including the performance of duties that were traditionally men's. The society was apprehensive about the safety of those who had joined the force. Within the society itself, there was an increase in the death rate due to the hardship of the war situation. This exacerbated the anxiety created by the war. Prayers were offered in churches. Individuals obtained personal charms from powerful herbalists. It was a crisis situation that needed remedy. The reliable oracle called Uke revealed the immediate and drastic remedy for the predictable tragic death of young Izzi people in the war front and at home. Uke pledged its protection and decreed the production of mask performances by women. This was the genesis of Ogbodo-Uke masking by women of Izzi clan. Starting from Ewumini village, which is the headquarters of Uke oracle, the performance spread to other villages of Izzi.

Ogbodo-Uke is, therefore, deeply rooted in the belief system of the society. The oracle is a central mythic figure in the history of the clan. During a period of serious menace from the non-Igbo neighbors in the northern area, the Uke oracle was instituted by a visitor from the northeastern area. The oracle pitched camp with Izzi people, who promptly defeated their enemy. From then on, the people began to rely on the oracle which had continued to live up to expectations. One is naturally curious about the identity of the oracle that exhibited such a feminist impulse that was revolutionary. All my informants except one claim that the officiating agent of the oracle is a man. The one claims that there are women agents, however, corroborates the information that the very first Uke agent was a man.⁴ Whether man or woman, the agent has shown a feminist impulse that led to radical social change. Women's masking was an innovation that was capable of causing serious upheaval, but because of its ritual importance in the clan, it was accepted by all, including those who did not like the idea.

Women readily embraced the decree which propelled them to another level of importance. They began to organize and wear a mask, *Ogbodo-Uke*, which is named after the oracle. *Ogbodo* refers to the mask character; *Uke* is the name of the liberative oracle. Women perform the play during the *Uke* festival in February. It is a five-day festival of ritual, feasting, and dramatic entertainment. The first day is devoted to ritual observance at the shrine of *Uke*. Feasting, rituals, and masking take up the other days. However, masking is the major attraction in the program.

The mask ensemble is made up of senior women, not young girls and teenagers. The women co-opt young men to carry and beat the drums. The performance consists of a mask-figure and her followers. The head of the mask-figure is an anthropomorphic wooden mask with horns, ears, and humanoid face. The ear is a curious projection with a humanoid face. The mask is horizontal and lies flat on the masker's head. Ruffles of raffia support the base of the mask, forming a kind of bed for the mask. The mask is white with streaks of black, red, and yellow pigment marking out the features. The agape mouth, for example, is red, while the opening of the nose is black. The bell-shaped brown raffia costume also has black and red lines.

One cannot help noticing the marked difference between the *Ogbodo-Uke* mask-figure produced by women and the mask-figures representing women in men's productions. The most popular female figure of men's ensemble is *Agbogho-mmonwu*. The figure simulates the physical features, dance, and movement of a feminine woman (Okafor, "Behind the Inscrutable Wonder" 45). *Ogbodo-Uke* makes no attempt at feminine finery. There is no attempt to disguise the arms and legs of the actress. The female limbs are quite visible under the short sleeves of the knee-high costume. This kind of costume enables the limbs to be free for the running bouts of the figure. Unlike the female figures produced by men, *Ogbodo-Uke* carries a whip. This is a sign of aggression, a trait that is typically reserved for male figures in men's productions and is not part of the characterization of female figures. Running bouts which are part of the dramatic action of *Ogbodo-Uke* are also absent in the action of female figures of men's ensembles, where such aggressive actions are depicted only as male mask-characters.

The women, however, do not regard *Ogbodo-Uke* as a female mask nor as a male one, either. According to Madam Angelina Ogan, an informant, "It is simply *Ogbodo-Uke*. It is not a man. God forbid!" It is the spirit essence, not gender of the mask, that is important to the women producers. They have not overtly stylized the character to show that a woman is acting it by emphasizing her breast or the swinging of her hips as do the male producers of female characters. Nor do the women hide the breasts of the actress. The mask-character is simply to be seen as it is, a spirit depicted by a woman.

The performance starts with a ritual at the shrine of the oracle. This is a kind of prologue to the main theatrical event. The dramatic action of the masker consists of dancing, running around the arena, and chasing antagonists with followers in hot pursuit. *Ogbodo-Uke* uses her followers and the

spectators to perform her role as a friendly spirit. She dances with her followers in episodes in which she acts as the lead dancer. These episodes portray the cooperation between the Uke oracle represented by the mask character and the Izzi people represented by the dancers. There is usually no winner since the dancing session is not a contest. But in honor of the Uke spirit, the followers usually accord superiority to the mask. This is done through dramatic action, either by a dancer embracing the mask-figure or through the ululation of the women. She is also saluted by appreciative members of the audience.

The “running” and “chasing” episodes depict another aspect of the Uke spirit: toughness. The swiftness and zeal with which the oracle solves problems is portrayed through the mask-character’s fast pursuit of antagonists. She usually uses young teenage boys as antagonists whom she pursues and sometimes strikes with her whip. As she runs, her followers run after her. The chase is always concluded with a dance. It is a victory dance celebrating the joy of the occasion. The overriding emotion of the performance is joy. The women happily honor the oracle for its role in the performance. One of the popular songs, “Ogbo Ogbodo,” contains a tribute to the oracle:

<i>Igbo</i>	<i>Translation</i>
Ogbo Ogbodo ezuo na.	The gathering of mask performers is complete.
Anyi ezuo na.	We are complete.
Ani ewubena Ogbodo-Uke.	We are wearing the mask of Uke.
Uke olua olua odoro.	Uke that fights and fights and remains immovable.
Ogbodo juru oma.	The mask that embraces.

The above lyric expresses the women’s joy in breaking the indomitable door that barred them from the sacred activity of masking and achieving full integrity as people who can play with the gods. This is why they say that they “are complete.” It is an affirmation of their new integrity. Previously, a man who was not initiated into a masking cult was sometimes derogatively referred to as a woman because women never used to mask. The introduction of women masking has punctured this relegation and uplifted the women. The new experience is due to the intervention of a reputable warlord, Uke spirit, saluted as one that does fierce battles and remains unscathed as if nothing happened. Odoro, which means “immovable,” refers to its unperturbed stance after a terrifying battle. The song also expresses the women’s appreciation of the oracle for its friendship and protection. The unscathing ability of the oracle is also attributable to the women since they are able to deal with unsolvable crisis. In a symbolic song, “Okpembe,” they refer to themselves as *okpembe*, a kind of small tough yam which one can disregard easily because of its small size but which always surprises the mouth. It always proves to be too big for the mouth to handle. The praise name of the yam, *ata ebu onu* (chewing it swells the mouth), is an

appropriate metaphor for the situation of women in society. Women are easily disregarded, yet they prove to be the life force of the society. John E. Njoku makes a similar point when he describes the strategic roles of African women and their relegation. He goes further to agree with Mohammed that “the real wretched of the earth in Fanon’s well-known phrase were the women of Africa” (10).

The women performers also salute the community and their leader in the songs. The people are called “Igbudu otu ali” (Big trap that traps the land). The image invokes the people’s prowess in farming the land. *Igbudu* is a very big trap used for catching big animals. It is therefore a metaphor for the great farming populace that “catches” the land as the trap does big animals. The women use many vegetation images because of their natural habitat and their constant contact with vegetation through cultivation. They refer to the traditional ruler of the village as “Okpa l’egu” referring to his prowess in farming.⁵ The dominant mood of the lyrics is joy. Joyful messages such as “Anyi akworia ha” (We are enjoying here) and “Ono l’ura tehu” (Whoever is sleeping should wake up) recur in the songs and emphasize the mood of the event. The popular chorus of the women who run after the mask-character expresses the need to hurry in order to participate in the enjoyable performance:

<i>Igbo</i>	<i>Translation</i>
Ono l’ura tehu	Whoever is sleeping, wake up.
Tehu kpodahuya.	Try hard and wake up.
Egede shuru gede.	Something great has happened.

The above song is a call for women’s solidarity, emancipation, joy, and greatness. “Wake up” is a call for release from forces that tie women down and prevent them from seeking and glorifying their new experience. The women praise themselves for attaining another level of awareness where they perform the mask play:

<i>Igbo</i>	<i>Translation</i>
Anyi akworia ha.	We are enjoying here.
Ogbodo akworia ha.	Mask spirit is enjoying.
Ntanu anyi evuru akara, nye l’ekwo.	Today we carry a symbol, print it in a book.
Ono l’ura tehu.	Whoever is sleeping, wake up.

The above lyric expresses pride. The women use it to congratulate themselves for gaining new power. Their ritual power has influenced the divine destruction of the boundary of gender barring them from masking. They now have their own cult and organize their own performance, which they refer to as a symbol (*akara*). It symbolizes their power, struggle, freedom, and separateness.

Not everyone shares the enthusiasm of the women maskers. There are some young men who resent the newfound authority of women. While they would not thwart the performance because of its spiritual significance, they would not openly acknowledge its existence. A village teacher from Unuhu

community blatantly affirmed that women did not wear mask: "That thing is not our culture. Culture is a people's way of doing things. It is not our way. Only men wear masks." This is a refusal to acknowledge change in the status of women. The speaker is resentful of the new phenomenon, but he is powerless to stop the performance. Some of the young men who are curious about the women's mask usually turn up in the arena. The mask-figure frequently targets them for use as antagonists in the chasing game. No sooner do they receive lashes or escape from the masker than they return for more runs. In this way, they enjoy the performance and this is a sign of acceptance. Elderly men are appreciative of Ogbodo-Uke. It is not uncommon to see an elderly man or woman approach, salute, and embrace the masker. Sometimes gifts are given. Being a friendly spirit, the masker usually returns such greetings. It is clear that the reception of the women's mask is mixed. Herbert H. Cole and Chike Aniakor drew a similar conclusion about a performance:

Male reception of the female Ogbodo-Enyi ranges from open disdain and amusement to great pride in their women's privileged status. Several young men dismiss it as a lie but all older people of both sexes take the performance seriously. (158)

The controversial attitude to the women's mask is not surprising. Most of the things that deviate drastically from tradition are not easily accepted. Ogbodo-Uke is not an exception. Its performance by women is a radical deviation from tradition. It has empowered the women to dance with a great spirit. It is a thing of pride for the women and the Izzi people irrespective of the negative attitudes. The degree of cooperation between the women and their counterparts in male cults attests to this. The female cultists received the support of male cultists while inaugurating their own cult. The same carvers and costumers who work for the men were co-opted to work for the women. The women also freely borrow costumes and stage properties from their male counterparts. In short, the new organization relies on acquiring techniques from the older and more experienced cults, which are all men's. This kind of cooperation between women and men cultists has continued. It belies any antagonism towards the women's cult.

The women, however, do not see their mask as antagonistic to the men's. Their masking is seen as an act of redemption for the community. Its theatricality is complementary to that of the men. Like its sister counterpart in Liberia and Ivory Coast (Hinkley 40), the cult abides by the codes that govern masking in general, for it is part of the large community of mask cults. Thus, there is a certain degree of unity with men's cults.

Within the concord with other cults, the women's cult is different. Its theatricality is unique, new, and parallel to that of the men. Like the Sowo mask of the Sande, Ogbodo-Uke is a sign of separateness, for it segregates the women. It promotes their sisterhood in sharing a common experience. It also expresses their independence. The women are no longer dependent on their sons and husbands as "voices" in the mask cults that relegate them to

the periphery. They now function in the center by wearing the mask, controlling the performance, and speaking with their own “voice” through the songs and dramatic action.

Previously, women used to occupy the periphery of the masking performance in Izzi while men functioned in the center as actors and organizers. In this kind of situation, women used to be the receivers of the dramatic chase episodes while men played the role of executors of the chase. With the birth of women’s cults, the roles were reversed and women became executors in their own productions. Their new role as executors instead of receivers is an expression of the women’s voice. It is a kind of answer to their position in the periphery of men’s performance. They choose the performers and classify antagonists and protagonists at their will. In short, the women control the production.

The newfound voice is an achievement that makes a vigorous point about women’s struggles. It shows that struggle and emancipation are not new, that a subordinated group will always seek emancipation. The women of Izzi used the traditional structures to cross the boundary and express their own self themselves. The same structures and beliefs that help to inhibit them are the ones that are manipulated to aid their emancipation. The women claim not to be influenced by the Women’s Liberation Movement favored by the educated class.⁶ Yet it is clear that both the women and men have heard about the movement.⁷ The women are aware of their subordination and exclusion from masking, but they are unwilling to blame society for this. Instead, they prefer to focus on the exciting result of their struggle, which is the performance. It is an experience which has put them in a special place among Igbo women, a place where they organize and carry the mask.

The experience has laid to rest some controversial issues about the exclusion of women from carrying the mask. Previous research shows that the exclusion was based on “the fact of its being against tradition of their wise forefathers” and the notion that “women are physically weak and may not cope with the job of mask-carrying” (Okafor, “The Rejected Corner Stone” 27). Izzi women’s masking has illustrated the susceptibility of tradition to change. It lends support to the notion of Igbo social flexibility within the rigidity of the tradition (Fido 224). The change was possible within the cultural gamut of Igbo tradition that contains the seeds of change such as the female principle and belief system that affected the origin of women’s mask.⁸ As for the mask being too heavy for women, the actress of Ogbodo-Uke wears a similar—and sometimes the same—mask that the male actor wears in men’s Ogbodo-Enyi cult. She performs the running and chasing episodes just as her male counterparts. She has not fallen in performance.⁹

In conclusion, one would note that women’s masking reinforces the strength of women’s power in Igbo culture as well as the flexibility of the tradition. No matter how rigid a tradition is, it has to succumb to changes when the conditions are ripe for change. The peculiar situation of the war gave rise to insecurity that led to the origin of women’s mask. Its development through the oracle shows the supremacy of religion and the capacity of the

belief system to initiate a revolutionary activity and contain its eruptive crisis.

—I am grateful to Hon. Justice Eze Ozobu, whose influence in Abakiliki area made the almost impossible field work a realizable venture in 1991, and Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, who invited me to contribute to this issue when she visited my University in December 1992.

NOTES

¹All my informants maintain that it is a special privilege to belong to a masking cult.

²According to the oral tradition of Ozuakoli in Abia State of Nigeria, a woman offered her life to Aro maskers in return for her husband whom they captured on his way to Arochukwu. Impressed by the woman's self-sacrifice, the maskers taught her the art of masking. Back home in Ozuakoli, her husband's people learnt the performance from her and killed her so that she would never impart the knowledge to another group.

In Arondizogu (Imo State) there is a story connecting the origin of Mmonwu masking to a woman. According to the story, Ugodiya had left her husband, Okoye Immonwu, in the farm because she had a fever. When her husband returned home, he did not find her, so he went back to look for her in the farm area. What he found was what he believed to be a "spirit." The spirit was only Ugodiya who had covered herself with cloth because she was feeling cold. Ugodiya was, therefore, the first mask performer. Her masking laid the foundation of masking which not only excluded her but assumed her husband's name, Mmonwu.

³The Odo masking of Nsukka-Igbo originated through a woman, a widow named Urunye and her baby son (Enekwe 157). The choice of a widow with child is symbolic of the life-giving force of women. Among the Anambra-Igbo, the biggest communal mask, Ijele is always led by a powerful mother figure called Nne Ijele (mother of Ijele) whose supernatural power is reputed to ensure the mask's safety. This is an extension of the life-giving and life-nurturing function of women.

⁴This is an area that is still under investigation because it is necessary to appreciate the impulse and motive that influenced the agent.

⁵Translators present two interpretations: 1. One who conquers hunger. 2. One who keeps company with farmland. The divergence arose from the use of the word "Egu" meaning "farm" or "hunger." In spite of the discrepancy in translation, both interpretations underline a kind of prowess in farmwork.

⁶Izzi is not as developed as other areas of Igboland. The people are not as open to new ideas as other areas. Thus, one was inclined to believe Madam Mbam's assertion that Ogbodo-Uke had nothing to do with Women's Liberation per se. My discussion with her reveals that it had to do with women's struggles within the culture. Women of Izzi did not learn of their subordination from educated women. They were tackling their problems in their own ways.

⁷One of the men who were hostile to my inquiry bluntly told me that they did not allow "Women's Liberation in this place," even when I had not suggested any such thing. This motivated my later inquiry into the possibility of any connection with the movement.

⁸The origin of Ogbodo-Uke raises a vital question about the association of women's struggle with crisis points in Igboland. One wonders whether new structures have originated through other crisis points in history. This would be an exciting area of research, given the way old structures are modified and new ones develop to contain the exigencies of crisis situations in Igboland.

⁹There is, however, the story of a woman who refrained from continuing carrying the mask because “the spirit was worrying her.” Her withdrawal from masking was spiritual rather than physical. Another woman continued with the task.

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