

“Burn the Mmonwu”

Contradictions and Contestations in Masquerade Performance in Uga, Anambra State in Southeastern Nigeria

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ALL PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR



1 Ajabu is a solitary and unpleasant masquerade, historically associated with the fight against a British punitive expedition that occupied the town in 1916. Uga, July 19, 2005.

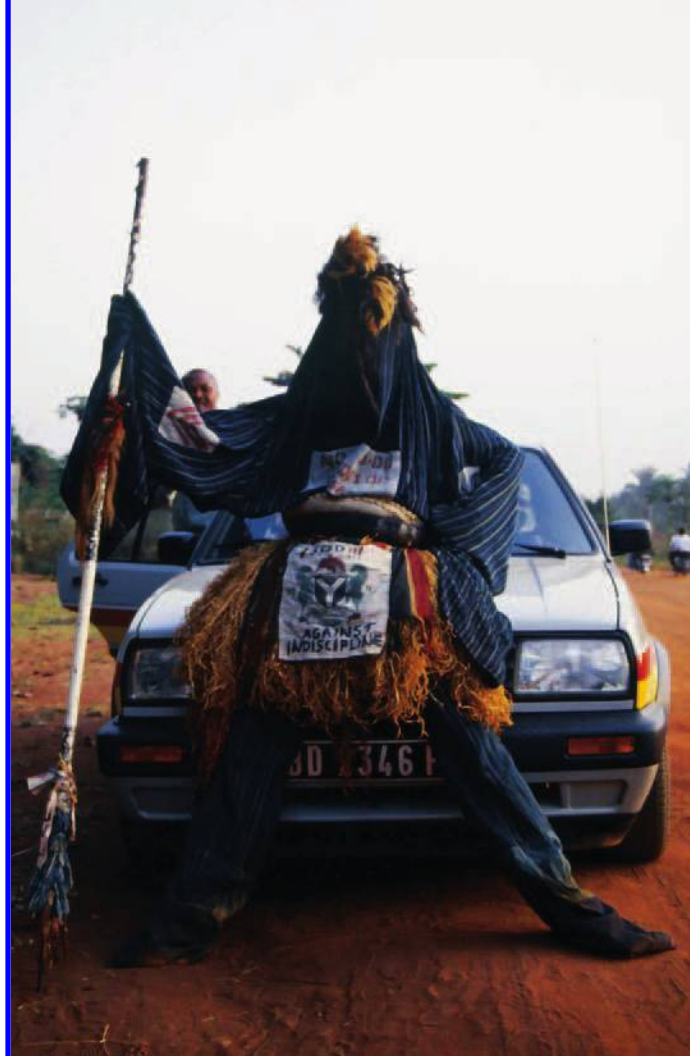
Masquerade performances organized by male associations are a distinctive feature of public performance among Igbo-speaking peoples of southeastern Nigeria (Jones 1984, Cole and Aniakor 1984) and have been the subject of attention by African art historians in the twentieth century (Ottenberg 1975, Aniakor 1978, Ugonna 1984, Henderson and Umunna 1988, Bantor 1995). Innovation and change in terms of iconography, ritual, and dramatic presentation have always been important components to these performances, as well as flexible adaptations and responses to changing social circumstances (Figs. 1–3). However, in the last two decades, new mass movements of Christian evangelism and Pentecostalism have emerged, successfully exhorting their members to reject masquerade as a pagan practice. During this time, in many places in southeastern Nigeria, famous and long-standing masquerade associations have disbanded and their masks and costumes burnt as testimonies to the efficacy of Pentecostalism, affirming the successful conversion of former masquerade members. This research examines the challenges that changing localized circumstances pose to masquerade practice in one locale in southeastern Nigeria.

Uga¹ is located in southeastern Nigeria in Aguata Local Government Area (LGA) in Anambra state, along the Nnewi–Okigwe expressway in Nigeria, some 40 km (25 mi.) eastwards from Onitsha on the river Niger (Fig. 4). It consisted until recently of four village units—Umueze, Awarasi, Umuoru, and Oka—spatially contiguous with each other and has a population of some 20,000 individuals. Historically it had wide-ranging relations with both neighboring and more distant village clusters (with which it was often in alliance or conflict). These extended as far as Arochuku, with whom they had married in the mid-nineteenth century (Anaedobe and Ezenwaka 1982:33). Uga is headed by an Igwe, the title often used to denote the forms of kingship that have emerged and been adopted throughout southeastern Nigeria in the twentieth century (for a discussion see Harneit-Sievers 1998, Matsumoto 2003). This replaced an earlier local title, Eze, which was considered not to have as much regional credence as the more widely adopted Igwe title. The current Igwe's father was the first to be conferred with this title, as he was deemed to be the direct and senior descendant of the founder of the Uga community.

At the present time Uga is without a police station, although

mobile police set up temporary road blocks on a daily basis. The community conducts most of its judicial affairs internally through committees that regulate matters such as less-serious infractions of the law and the use of vigilante patrols to police the community and ensure collective security. Despite the adoption of a king in the person of the Igwe, social organization retains many of its earlier acephalous characteristics, based on segmentary principles centered on the patrilineages (*umunna*, ‘children of a common forefather’). These vary in size from one to many households, and the household or compound is the smallest territorial unit. However, the *umunna* is the smallest political unit, made up of its adult males. Its meetings are held in the compound of the head of the most senior family by descent, through whom collective and individual interests are negotiated. Wider interests and conflicts are dealt with at a village assembly overseen by *ozo* titleholders and meetings are summoned by beating the *ikoro*, the massive carved wooden slit drum found in each village square. Similarly, when this proves insufficient, the assembly of the village cluster is held, which all adult males attend (Anaedobe and Ezenwaka 1982:20–21). This assembly is the basis for the largest political unit. Some precolonial forms of organization, albeit much modified in the twentieth century, still have a great deal of salience in offering a template for organizing the community in interactions with the Nigerian state where the state’s infrastructures are relatively weak. In Uga there are presently five age sets within an age-grade system structured on gerontocratic principles. These are organized on a village basis within each of the four village units, through which much political and judicial action can also be exercised.

Masquerade has a long history in Uga. One founding charter of the origins of masquerade is that when yam farming on Uga land first began, theft became an immediate problem. Masked figures were used to deter thieves, and from this practice masquerade developed in a variety of performative styles and forms practiced exclusively by men, whose individual identities as performers remained unknown. Young palm fronds (*omu*) were tied



2 Uga masquerade confronting a car, embellished with the slogan “war against indiscipline”—a slogan promoted by the Nigerian government parastatal organization Mamser, although now applied to the power of this masquerade. December 26, 1991.

3 A prominent Uga masquerade known as “Double Trouble” underlying its prowess and dangerous capabilities. March 28, 2005.

to a tree, plant, or post as a warning against theft (Fig. 5)—and at least until the recent past, a masquerade would come out in response to any infractions to punish the person who had disregarded the warning. Different masquerades were autonomous to each other. However, various kinds of disputes and conflicts, particularly between the four village units, could be negotiated through the associations that supported and underpinned each respective masquerade.² In these instances, such an association would negotiate with a corresponding or comparable masquerade in the other village unit to resolve a dispute, mediated by the principles of collective authority that underlie masquerade in Uga. These principles could on occasion be used to negotiate with other village clusters, but the congruence between opposing masquerade associations becomes harder to establish and prone to break down (unless that masquerade was directly acquired from the other group, in which case associational links were maintained or could be revived). In each village unit in Uga there is an *Onye Isi Mmonwu* ('head of masquerade'), a direct descendant of the individual who first introduced masquerade into that village community. All masquerades who pass over that community's land should pay their respects to the *Onye Isi Mmonwu* prior to performance or any other action that may be taken (Fig. 6). There is also an overarching *Onye Isi Mmonwu* who is seen as the head of all masquerade in Uga (and who resides in the village unit of Awarasi).³

Masquerade entities are separate and autonomous to the deities who used to be worshipped within Uga.⁴ Two terms, *mmonwu* and *mmanwu*, are used to designate masqueraders in twenty-first century Uga, and they semantically overlap. *Mmonwu* stems as a gloss from *mmuo onwu* (lit. 'spirit dead'), highlighting that the masquerade is a temporary embodiment in the material world from the world of the dead. (There are a wide range of variable interpretations for both these words across the Igbo-speaking region; for a discussion of some of these see Ugonna 1984:2, Cole and Aniakor 1984:113). *Mmanwu* is a gloss

for *mma onwu* (lit. 'beauty dead'), which draws on a range of ideas about funerary commemoration in which the deceased is displayed lying in state in his or her compound dressed in finery and surrounded by an array of beautiful hanging or rolled-up textiles.⁵ Semantic and aesthetic parallels are drawn between the decoration and display of the deceased during funerary rites and the elaboration of decoration of masquerades, which locate masquerade conceptually in the spirit world where the dead reside and as part of this collective. Masquerades enter the world of the living temporarily through the holes made by ants, either in the ground or in anthills. However, when they appear they do not represent named and identifiable forebears, and Cole and Aniakor (1984:113) observe that "never among the Igbo are they 'portraits' of individuals, nor do they refer to specific individuals who have lived" despite being physical manifestations from the community of the incarnate dead. A central concept to the material embodiment of masquerade in Uga is that cloth or other materials cover every surface and limb, in order that the presence of the *mmonwu* is realized in public spaces.⁶

Only males can be initiated into masquerade, usually during their time within the youth age-set. Every male has the right to join, although not everyone decides to take up masquerade practice and, indeed, there has been local opposition to it since the advent of the Anglican church circa 1914. Public performances are spatially gendered, with women keeping their distance due to the inherent metaphysical and disciplinary dangers of masquerade. Up to the Biafran War (1967–1970) there were easily identifiable masquerade houses within each village, where communal masquerades were safely stored. These are no longer easily visible, although temporary structures and locked rooms in village community halls serve that purpose today in some communities. In addition, some masquerades, owned by a particular individual or family, are stored secretly within family compounds. There were a wide range of masquerades found in Uga along with the associations which supported them. They were the ave-



4 Decorated entrance way to the house of a wealthy businessman at Uga who works at Onitsha. December 30, 1991.



5 Masqueraders in procession at the ending of the Oka new yam festival, having removed the new palm leaf that four days earlier had been tied to a tree to allow masquerade to take place in public at Oka. August 22, 2006.

6 The Onye Isi Mmonwu (head of masquerade) of Oka seated with masqueraders inside the masquerade initiates' hut. Oka, August 20, 2005.

nue for the advancement of individual male social status within the male world of masquerade, particularly as the life cycle of the masquerade and its accumulated history of exploits within the community developed over time, thereby gaining prestige in comparison with other masquerades.

Masquerades are charged with medicines that provide metaphysical protection when they compete and ensure their efficacy and success in public displays. In Uga there remains a contrast between masquerades that appear during daytime and those that appear at night. Night masquerades are considered more dangerous and their access and viewing is restricted to senior men of the community who have initiated into them. Night masquerades are considered to generally have the most potent medicines, linked to their capacities to kill, and individuals who encounter them in the night must be holders of important titles within masquerade associations if they are not to be killed by the encounter. Due to their nocturnal nature, sound is a key component of these masquerades, as the range of noises alerts non-members (which includes initiates of other masquerades) to the presence of a particular night masquerade and warns of the consequences of encountering them (Reed 2005:52, Anetoh 1987:96–104, Cole and Aniakor 1984:132–33). Their presence is sometimes manifested the next day by a trail of torn-down trees or other damage and, when used in a judicial capacity on behalf of the community, by the death of an individual. For example, the night masquerade *Ogana igwe* ('it walks on the air') emerges at night time to the sound

of gongs and the next day has left a trail of broken branches that indicates that it moved through the air without touching the ground. Its medicines are so powerful that it can turn day to night and, if it encounters stray domestic animals, such as goats, and even wayward humans, it cannot be held responsible for any death it causes. Night masquerades also used to perform late on the last night of funerary rites of prominent individuals, in an area outside the compound, marked out by fresh palm leaves, which only the masquerade and its association members (and members of comparably ranked masquerades) were able to attend.

By contrast, day masquerades emphasize display and performance within the public arena to an audience of members, other masquerade initiates, and non-initiates, including women





7 Okue-ekwe masquerade of Umueze performing for the last time at Uga. March 4, 1992.

8 Okue-ekwe masquerade of Umueze performing for the last time at Uga. March 4, 1992.



and individuals from outside Uga. They are also metaphysically charged with potent medicines that center on the competitive arenas in which they publicly perform. Most of these masquerades are associations that come together in fellowship to practice masquerade within and between the various Uga villages and also to compete against other towns' masquerades. On occasion they also perform at festivals organized by the Aguata LGA administration or at Anambra state festivals (for a description see Reed 2005).

Masquerades can be acquired from within the village that an individual belongs to, from the other villages of Uga, or from other communities. For example, *Asirimasi* ('Does not hide secrets') is a powerful solo masquerade noted for its capacity to neutralize the charms of hostile masquerades of other towns when Uga masquerades compete against them. While other Uga masquerades perform competitively against the host community's masquerades, *Asirimasi* mingles with the audience, dressed in a wrapper, in often humorous interactions, as if almost human itself. But at the same time it identifies and renders harmless hostile opposing charms by placing its walking stick in the shadow of anyone found to be exerting such means against the masquerades from Uga. It was first introduced by an Awarasi wood carver's father some seventy years ago, after he saw it perform during a visit to Arondizoguo and carved a perfect likeness.⁷ Although the masquerade is part of the incarnate dead, the performance and the exploits associated with it are what enhance its prestige and popularity, giving it a social biography within the community and attracting members to join its association or purchase the rights to set up a new masquerade and association (for another example see Picton 1990). In the relationships between individuals and masquerade groups, titles are acquired that give status and prestige within this autonomous yet secret world of men. Furthermore these titles and the histories of the



9 Nze Justin Uba, Ezenwamadu of Uga, a senior patron of the *Okue-ekwe* masquerade association, dancing the Ijele masquerade steps at the cultural festival held the day after Christmas at Uga. December 26, 1990.

masquerades by which such titles are acquired have a knock-on effect, allowing titleholders to exploit this social capital in the wider public political arena through the garnering of male support through this covert fame.

A TALE OF TWO VILLAGES IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY UGA

In the early twenty-first century, masquerade performance in two villages of Uga—Umueze and Oka—takes on different trajectories within a context in which many, if not the majority of inhabitants now regard masquerade as a pagan practice. Umueze is the senior village and the grouping from which the Igwe hails. During the twentieth century it was seen historically as the locus of political power and leadership within Uga. From Umueze ('children of the Eze') there has emerged a comparatively prominent, wealthy, and cosmopolitan elite established through privileged descent and mobility to the major cities of Nigeria. In part this is due to the forbears of this elite participating in colonial infrastructures and, as a result, gaining early access to colonial education. Oka is ranked second in seniority despite being smallest in size. It is also considered more distant in kinship terms compared with the other two village groups, with whom Umueze people intermarry more frequently.

Historically there was a convergence in the classes of masquerade between the different villages of Uga. Powerful masquerades (or their equivalents in the powers they claim) tended to

be adopted in the other villages of Uga. A notable masquerade, *Okue-ekwe* ('beater of gong'), was adopted in 1936 from Ezinifite, a neighboring community, by young men at Umueze because of its aesthetic excellence, for both the visual beauty of its masking and costuming as well as the artistry of its famous singing (Figs. 7–9). It was a group of five masquerades representing a father and mother with three daughters, led by the two *ori aja* ('the sacrificers') who bring the masquerade out into the public arena. Visually it was embellished with appliqué textile patterning (which for this Umueze *Okue-ekwe* masquerade were obtained from the Abakaliki area in the northern Igbo-speaking area). However, it was also powerful and medicinally charged, as its respective praise names indicated: for instance, the father masquerader's praise name was *Isi kote ebun o gbaa buo* ('If your head disturbs wasps, swarm it will kill you').

Okue-ekwe was a highly popular masquerade that people would rush to see when it came out to perform, both for its visual beauty as well as its role as a singing masquerade, which offered poetic yet highly satirical commentaries on the misdoings of individuals within the community, especially those who had gained social prominence. During performance, individuals would present money as an inducement to the masquerade not to reveal publicly their own misdoings, making it highly successful and profitable for its members. A famous story that is recounted of the *Okue-ekwe* masquerade was a public perfor-



mance in the 1950s when it identified someone as a thief. The individual concerned sought to take the matter to court to refute the accusation but, on the day the case was to be heard, it was the masquerade rather than its members that appeared at the court house. The court case was abandoned in recognition that the *Okue-ekwe* masqueraders were metaphysical agencies outside the jurisdiction of the court—to persist in the case would be to invite all manner of disaster on both the litigant and any court officials participating at the court. This masquerade was taken up as autonomous associations by other villages of Uga, such as its popularity.⁸ The *Okue-ekwe* of Umueze last performed in Umueze in 1992.

Masquerades look for responsible and potentially interested youths to induct and train up for masquerades. While this encourages a certain continuity, there is a cycle of innovation by which older masquerades die out, through loss of popularity or lack of adaptation to changing circumstances, and are replaced by new ones. Specific masquerades are not permanent and they can disappear as their members die or retire from public performance due to old age. This is acknowledged in the expression *O lara oru* ('It [the masquerade] has travelled to distant places'). Furthermore, change is inherent to the process of masquerade, as each time the masks disintegrate or the cloth wears out they are re-embellished with new carvings and textiles. Innovative designs and materials can be introduced to provide startlingly different iconographies for the same masquerade.

However, there has been a shift in this dynamic with the rise of Pentecostal churches across southern Nigeria in the late 1980s–early 1990s. The churches have defined themselves in contrast to the mainstream forms of Christianity, represented predominantly by the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches in Uga (the Roman Catholic church following shortly after the



10 The Igwe of Uga at the digging up of the first new yam from his land at the *Iba Ubi* (enter farm) ceremony that begins the new yam festival held at Umueze quarter. Uga, August 8, 2006.

11 Masquerade at Nwoko market square. Uga, December 27, 2005.

(opposite, top–bottom)

12 The Ikenga of Oka praying with kola nut at the opening of the Oka new yam festival. August 19, 2006.

13 Oka masquerade in discussion with youth who have to “settle the masquerade.” August 21, 2006.

introduction of the Anglican in the early twentieth century), by their active proselytizing. They project a cosmopolitan, international branding that emphasizes material success through participation in the Pentecostal community (for an example in Ghana see Meyer 1995). Crusades for conversion and use of the mass media are important means of highlighting their “modernity” and of enhancing the appeal of their movements, often encouraged by evangelical organizations in the United States, to which some of the larger churches have links. The Pentecostal churches have targeted local religious practices, including masquerade, as the pagan worship of idols and incited the destruction of community shrines in Aguata LGA.⁹ Their “active” modes of operation distinguish them from the mainstream Catholic, Protestant, and older Independent churches that have,



to a greater or lesser degree, implicitly accepted the presence of indigenous religion. Indeed, historically in the second half of the twentieth century, most masquerade associations were also members of either the Anglican or Roman Catholic churches in Uga. Before emerging publicly, the *Okue-ekwe* masqueraders practiced *nso* (‘abstinence’) to ensure a harmony with *mmonwu* by complying with its conditions and so securing the success of the performance.¹⁰ For the Umueze *Okue-ekwe* masqueraders, part of *nso* was offering up Christian prayers to ensure success, which highlighted their Christian affiliation, in contrast to the more usual practice of offering a sacrifice of an animal to the deities (Adimora 1986:72).

Many of the elite of Umueze have been recruited into Pentecostal churches and consider that these new movements reflect their lifestyles and ambitions. The Pentecostal churches have also converted many aspirational villagers within the wider Uga community. This has had two consequences. Firstly, the middle-aged, economically successful men who make up the mobile cosmopolitan elite have turned their back on masquerade as unworthy of interest, if they do not outright reject it for its idolatry and use of charms. Consequently, these men, who used to be either prime patrons or key members (but usually not performers) in the long-established, mature, and powerful masquerades, no longer participate or sponsor to the degree they used to. For this reason, masquerades are not as publicly visible nor do they come out, for example, at the burial of members or kin as much as they used—even when the deceased was prominent in masquerade performance or its association. As one middle-aged masquerader commented, “There is no longer fellowship, which now makes masquerade not possible.” Although its forms of sociality have seemingly diminished, there are still the latent associational networks generated through the former membership of particular masquerades, which can at times still have a bearing on political and social advancement. The *Okue-ekwe* masquerade still has a large number of associational members linked together by their past membership, even though it is now discontinued as a masquerade spectacle/performance. The second consequence is



that Pentecostal converts pressure family members to give up masquerade and burn the masks and costumes. Often current family afflictions or misfortunes are attributed to a senior member of the family practicing masquerade, making it very difficult for such family members to resist. In Umueze, there has been a severe decline in powerful masquerades compared to fifteen or twenty years ago. They have been marginalized as one of the forums for resolving disputes, as an avenue for political advancement, and in the making of successful mature men in the male-gendered social spaces.

This is not to say that masquerade has disappeared. At Christmas, Easter, and during the Iriji New Yam festival held in August in the rainy season, there are organized days when masquerades appear to the community (Figs. 10–12). These are, however, entertainment youth masquerades who appear in the market squares. The performance comprises display and challenges to onlookers who are their peers or younger, while the older male generations watch and appraise these performances. The masquerades confront male spectators, who have one of three options: they either “dash” (give them ten or twenty *naira*), demonstrate that they are masquerade members through disclosure of a shared knowledge of a masquerade attribute, or take a flogging from the masquerade to demonstrate their innate strength—the only other course of action is to outrun the masquerade, which the younger youth usually elect to do. Girls avoid the masquerades, staying on the periphery of the market square and moving away if challenged or confronted by these masqueraders.

Not all male youths take up masquerade, but a number still do and it is an arena of display and danger that provides them forms of prestige. Youth masquerades can generate a small income during the holiday seasons, and some develop these masquerades as semi-professional cultural troupes for the economic return, performing at events within Anambra State. During holiday periods at Umueze, when youth masquerade performs to the community, it is also noticeable how many children and youths actively seek out and engage with the masquerades (known as “settling the masquerade”; Figs. 13–14), offering knowledge of its attributes, performing masquerade steps (Fig. 15), and



(this page, top–bottom)

14 Youth “settling the masquerade” by giving it some money, so avoiding it attacking him. Oka, August 21, 2006.

15 Youth dancing at New Year’s Eve with dance steps characteristic of masquerade performance at Uga. December 31, 2005.

(opposite)

16 Some masqueraders at the Oka New Yam festival posing with mobile police for a local photographer. August 21, 2006.



playing the flute music associated with it. However, these are carefully managed events, with the next senior age set overseeing the masquerades within the defined spaces of Nwanko, the market square of Umueze. Despite the campaigns of the Pentecostal movement, masquerade is still part of the gendered practices of everyday life. However, it has different regimes that discipline it in ways different to those of previous generations. Charms are not allowed, so that there can be no serious harm inflicted by metaphysical means,¹¹ and masquerades are policed to ensure serious trouble or major confrontations do not occur (Fig. 16). However, they are still sites for contestation and, in the recent past, adolescents of the elite have been caught and flogged by masqueraders.

The public performances of youth masquerade valorize a localized Uga (and Umueze) culture and identity, albeit such performances are contested by many born-again Christians within the community. At Christmas 2006 there was a four-day rally by a local Pentecostal church against idol worship. Its members sat at one part of Nwanko square playing Christian music to little avail, as *mmonwu* freely mingled with them during the display of youth masquerade to the Umueze community. But the withdrawal of many middle-aged men from the sociality and spaces of masquerade has allowed youth masquerades take up new positionings that assert a localized “modern” autonomous identity by and for youth. Their masquerades are less constrained by the dominance of more senior and powerful masquerades, which are no longer present or exercising their gerontocratic authority. The youth masquerades foster a sense of collective regional youth identity and masquerade display defines them in contrast to the power and authority of the middle-aged men of the community, who have renounced masquerade practice as pagan. Video CD discs distributed across the region contain music and video recordings of masquerade performance, making public and affirming this youth masquerade. A striking example is to be found nearby at Arondizogou, where their Ikeji festival is distributed on video CDs that document the masquerade and the native doctor festival, including public demonstration of charms and ritual capabilities, focusing mainly on the youths who participate in it (Pericombo Okoye 2004, 2005). These video CDs are distributed at Uga and circulate both throughout the region and internationally via the Internet.¹² Furthermore, masquerade practice and its development by some local youths of the resident community also highlight a contrast between their permanent occupation and the temporary presence of the mobile elite, who leave their houses in Uga unoccupied for much of the time.

Turning to Oka, the second-ranked village of Uga, middle-aged men participate in masquerade to a greater extent at the village level. They have formed themselves into the Uga Cultural Group (Figs. 17–18) to organize and supervise performances in Oka and elsewhere in Uga, as well as in other communities and federal state competitions. The chairman of the Uga Cultural Group is the Onye Isi Mmonwu (‘head of masquerade’) of Oka. Within his remit is the most powerful masquerade in Oka, known as *Emelu-dike 50/50*. It came into being twenty years ago and has only appeared four times. Its role is as peacemaker, and its advent at any occasion is so charged with danger that when it appears, everyone flees, including all other masqueraders.

The “50/50” of this masquerade refers to its fifty percent capacity for war or fifty percent capacity for peace. It will win either way—especially through the potency of its charms. It wears on its costume three red stripes, linked to the idea of the raw power held by an army sergeant, and it draws on the history of Nigeria, where power lay with the military juntas that have ruled the country for much of its existence as a nation-state.

The last time it came out was over a land dispute in Oka. The two farming families in dispute were both planting and stealing crops from each other to assert their claims. Despite mediation, they refused to stop and the dispute escalated as more and more networks of kin and supporters became involved, leading to increasingly violent outbreaks. *Emelu-dike* publicly came out and placed *omu* (young palm leaf) on the disputed land to put a stop to the actions of both families, which were polarizing the community into two hostile, confrontational groupings. The land could not be used by any party after this, and over time the impasse created a space for peacemakers to broker a resolution of the dispute.¹³

Masquerade is managed carefully by the Uga Cultural Group and the Onye Isi Mmonwu of Oka is a highly visible figure, resolving conflicts in his role as a mediator. He takes charge of the youth masquerades that come out at holiday seasons supervised by the middle-aged men (who are perhaps active in masquerade). As youth masquerades can extract small cash rewards during performance, on occasion youths who have not been initiated will come out in masquerade costume. The Onye Isi Mmonwu or his supervisors challenge any unknown masquerader to ensure that he has been initiated and, in instances where this is not the case, strip him of his costume and fine him severely.

However, in Oka there is an emphasis on masquerade as cultural practice beyond its management. Over the last few years a difference has arisen between Umueze and Oka, precipitated in part by the writing of a new constitution, in which a chieftaincy title was created to head each of the villages apart from Umu-





17 The Onye Isi Mmonwu in red (with his Uga Cultural Group) adjudicating a dispute that had arisen between an Oka inhabitant and a masquerader. August 22, 2006.

18 Masqueraders at Oka with the older generation of practitioners (organized as the Uga Cultural Group) at the advent of masquerade during the new yam festival, August 19, 2006.



eze, which the Igwe also heads. On the day the prospective titleholders attended with their supporters to be given their newly created titles, these appointments were cancelled due to a belatedly raised constitutional problem. The issue was that if any Igwe died without a male heir, the internal government of Uga would shift to the (about-to-be-appointed) chief at Oka, the Ikenga of Uga, as the second-ranked community. This would in effect permanently transfer authority from the Umueze community, undermining the historic political precedents through which Uga was constituted. It became the crucible for an already ongoing debate in Oka as to whether it should secede and become an autonomous community and so gain direct access to state resources. This position garnered popular support throughout the community of Oka.

The Iriji New Yam festival of 2006 became a focus for this contestation. Historically, Umueze held the first new yam festival of the year at the Igwe's palace, explicitly on behalf all the communities of Uga. The Igwe dug up the first new yams from the royal plot, portions of which were given to each of the three other villages, thereby permitting the whole of Uga to eat from the harvest of new yams. As part of the ongoing festivities, families and other groupings, such as various *umunna* or societies of women, would subsequently hold their own new yam celebrations after the Igwe's new yam festival. To advance the claims of Oka as autonomous community, in 2006 the Ikenga of Oka (Fig. 19) took the unusual step of holding a public new yam festival at his palace, although it remained ambiguous whether this was the customary private new yam festival for his family or a new practice as the (possibly autonomous) head of Oka. This elicited much discussion throughout Uga communities in the days that followed. The next day the entire Oka community held its own Iriji festival, as was customary.

Masquerade performance became an important locus for defining an Oka identity through their Iriji festival, which took place over four days. The Uga Cultural Group organized the cultural events, and central to this project was masquerade performances. These cultural spectacles were now being positioned as autonomous to the rest of Uga instead of as a part



19 The Ikenga of Oka in front of the decorated gates that highlight his elite status and prestige. August 19, 2005.

of it. The first day of the new yam festival commenced with the display and distribution of portions of the new yam obtained from the Ikenga's farm plot (ambiguously paralleling the Igwe's distribution of new yams). A range of competitions was held, including a competition for the heaviest new yams, which were weighed publicly. After the competitions and the award of prizes, the day finished with selected masquerades coming out to set up *omu* to signify the coming out of masquerade for the following three days. Significantly, the youth masquerades who began to appear at Ofor, the Oka market square, were not from the whole of Uga, as in the Nwanko market spectacle at Umueze (after the Igwe's new yam festival), but from Oka alone. They reported to the temporary masquerade sanctum to ensure that they legitimately could masquerade (as Oka indigenes) and were given numbers pinned to their costumes to identify them in case conflict or disputes took place—in which case the number could be reported to the Onye Isi Mmonwu, who would take the appropriate actions to resolve the dispute between the performer and other parties. In many ways, the reconfiguring of the customary Oka Iriji festival appears to have appropriated some elements from the neighboring town of Amesi (Fig. 20), which has promoted its masquerades and native doctors within a public arena since the 1970s to affirm a localized identity and a shared cultural heritage irrespective of religious persuasion. Amesi holds a masquerade dancing/performance competition each New Year's Day overseen by the Igwe of Amesi, E.I. Umeonankume, his council, and the general populace.

Perhaps not unsurprisingly, in 2007 Oka broke away from Uga and became an autonomous community within Aguata LGA. The Ikenga was recognized within the Nigerian state as the Ikenga I of Oka. Cole cites a personal communication from G.I. Jones that "many villages are not really sure whether they want to be independent local units or part of a larger group. In some social situations and in some periods of their history they act as independent units, in others, as part of a larger one" (1982:9),

and this is still a key positioning in engaging with the Nigerian nation-state and competition for its resources. Cultural resources were mobilized in the making of an autonomous identity for Oka and the deployment of masquerade was integral to this project. Despite the seeming decline of masquerade in the twenty-first century, it is an important site for asserting culturally defined identities that enable the taking up of particular political and economic positionings locally, regionally, or nationally, and in the example of Oka, at the local community and LGA tiers of articulation with the Nigerian nation-state.

CONCLUSION

In considering the rise of Pentecostal movements as a dominant discourse actively antagonistic to masquerade over the last fifteen years or so, it would appear that there has been a decline in masquerade. At Umueze in Uga there has been the withdrawal of the powerful masquerades, recognized as empowered metaphysically with potent medicines, and a number of major masquerades are no longer present, "having travelled to distant places," to quote the adage. However, this contestation of masquerade has a more contradictory dynamic.

Firstly, the everyday practices associated with playing with masquerade in Uga are still widely dispersed in a range of embodied practices such as dance. Masquerade dances are acquired without the transfer of the actual masquerade associated with that dance, such as the dance of the Ijele masquerade (Gore and Nevadomsky 1997:68). There are also the playful bodily responses that mimic masquerade movements linked to its flute music and knowledge of its attributes (Fig. 21)—these take place in confrontation with masquerades but also on public occasions with no masquerade presence. This is disseminated not only in public performances but also in the form of video CDs, the Internet, and other mass media—and even successful, elite, middle-aged men, who have turned away from masquerade, still download masquerade flute music as their mobile



20 Masqueraders competing for the prize cup at Amesi (a neighboring and adjacent community to Uga) who are acknowledged by an older generation of practitioners. January 1, 2007.

phone ring tones.

In contrast, the cultural repertoires of masquerade in Oka village of Uga became a key means to assert an emergent political autonomy and was a valuable cultural resource in its new political self-definition. Moreover, in a discussion with the Onye Isi Mmonwu of Oka, he considered the impact of Pentecostalism similar to the building of the Anglican and Catholic churches around 1946 in Oka (a later date than at Umueze) as an accommodation that had little impact on masquerade.¹⁴ Its antagonistic campaigning did not disturb the quotidian practices of masquerade despite the fewer major masquerades now found in Oka and Uga generally. Instead, there is a wider social circuit of major masquerades in the region in which he participates as Onye Isi Mmonwu. This makes the disappearance of some major Uga masquerades not as significant an event as it might initially

seem. Moreover, current youth entertainment masks have the potential capacity to develop into major masquerades.

Secondly, entertainment masquerades of the youth are a part of cultural repertoires that coalesce youth as a category in opposition to older generations in ways that challenge or at least subvert the authority of elite, middle-aged men who have taken up Pentecostalism and now reject masquerade fellowship as a potential avenue of social advancement. Masquerade now offers an alternative mode of sociality centered on localized youth identities (see Nunley 1987 for an example of fractured and contested youth masquerade in the 1970s in Freetown, Sierra Leone) rather than defining a wider collective set of intergenerational relations between male age-sets at community level (d'Azevedo 1973, Yoshida 1993, Ottenberg 1972, 1975). Furthermore, in defining elite relations within the town, the at-home youths define a local-



21 Masquerade at Oka confronting but also dancing with a flute musician, who is playing the music associated with masquerade performance. August 21, 2006.

ized and spatialized circuit of ideas and practices that highlights their positioning as permanently resident (De Certeau 1988:95–110). Youth masquerades also provide a locus for the making of wider regional “modern” youth identities that contest the exclusive claims made by Pentecostal movements of a “modernity” defined and made by a rejection of a pagan past. Mass media becomes a site for this contestation and the engendering of masquerade youth identities. There is a surprisingly large number of masquerade video CD discs in circulation among youth that document masquerade events (Bantu Communications Concept n.d) or offer its performances as cultural backdrop to renowned musicians (such as Pericom Okoye n.d.). Their production, distribution, and circulation is antithetical to the brand of “moder-

nity” advanced by the Pentecostal movement and its modes of representation within the mass media construct an alternative, youth-defined “modernity”. Masquerade has many dimensions and is a site for many overlapping discourses, local, regional, national, and international.¹⁵ Although major masquerades are perhaps not as commonplace as in the past in Uga, masquerade there is a medium that has a flexible capacity to adapt, change, and innovate that is perhaps its creative artistic signature.

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Notes

This article is dedicated to Nze Justin Ubajekwe (also known as Uba), Ezenwammadu of Uga, 1920–2003.

1 It is perhaps best known as the home of Christian Uba, the “godfather” of Anambra state politics, and his brother, the temporary governor of Anambra state in 2007.

2 This includes not only the masqueraders and public performers such as musicians and followers but also patrons who sponsor the masquerade and others who take up membership within the masquerade association.

3 Awarasi village also borders on Achina, Umu-chu, Amesi, and Nkporogwu, which are all noted as centers of masquerade (Nze Justin Uba, Ezenwammadu of Uga, personal communication. January 2, 2003).

4 There are only a very small number who still adhere to worship of the deities found in Uga, who included Idenmili-Umuagbaja, Udo-Okwu, Ogwugwu-Umucheke, Uraasi, Ojukwu, Nwachi, and Nwoko, among others (Nze Justin Uba, Ezenwammadu of Uga, personal communication January 2, 2003).

5 During the funerary rites, visiting groups to the compound of the deceased present a cloth among other gifts to the deceased’s family.

6 There is a discourse on masquerades of other communities that is highly critical and unfavorable, where a particular masquerade displays uncovered hands or feet as these are considered not to constitute proper *mmonwu* (Nze Justin Uba, Ezenwammadu of Uga, personal communication. February 10, 1992).

7 Pa John Umeanoka, personal communication, December 29, 2005.

8 The visual embellishment which was a publicly acclaimed feature of Oku-ekwe differed in each village, such that the carver John Umeanoka of Awarasi village (personal communication, January 4, 2006) described the Umuneze Oku-ekwe as Ijele, highlighting that iconographically it used cloth with wooden projectiles like the Ijele masquerade of Onitsha rather than wooden masks like the Awarasi Oku-ekwe.

9 A community shrine located in the central market at Achina was destroyed in the middle of the night at the behest of a local Pentecostal preacher and similar cases of destruction of shrines persist in the area (Mbachu 2007).

10 Maintaining secrecy from women and abstinence from sexual relations make up some elements of *nso*, as does marking out the masquerade’s public emergence (*opupu* ‘going out’) and its public retirement (*mbata* ‘coming in’). Failure to comply with *nso* can result in the masquerade destroying itself during the performance, with disastrous consequences.

11 Reed (2005:57) has argued that the banning of medicines is an elite top-down disciplining that stemmed from the Anambra state organized Mmanwu festival established in 1986 (and other conduits of state author-

ity). However there has been a discourse within Uga on the use of charms stretching back to the 1960s (Gore and Nevadomsky 1997:68) which has classified charms as harmful or malign rather than as previously ambivalent, defined by their consequences with either positive or negative outcomes. There is a dialectic to this local discourse in that Uga has no doctor and many inhabitants cannot afford the high costs of medicalized health care and so resort to *dibia* native doctors for treatment, leading to a private exercise of such ritual medicines.

12 www.viewnaija.com, accessed April 30, 2008.

13 Nze Everestus Umealakei, personal communication, August 25, 2006.

14 Nze Everestus Umealakei, personal communication, August 22, 2008.

15 The Onye Isi Mmonwu of Oka cited how, at the request of diasporic indigenes, he had facilitated the export of masquerade to the USA for masquerade performances by cultural troupes that are used in defining diasporic Igbo identities (and even to South Korea in transnational flows).

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