

IGBO MASQUERADE PERFORMANCE AND THE PROBLEM OF  
ALIEN INTERVENTION: TRANSITION FROM CULT TO THEATRE

by

Emeka Nwabueze

*"The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart."<sup>1</sup>*

The lack of unity to act together which is being lamented in the above quotation characterizes the feelings of a majority of the Igbo people after the European's arrival in Igboland. The Igbos who were initially amused at the European's ways were amazed later at the cleverness with which he won over the people. Initially, slaves, oppressed, and indigent people were the ones who welcomed the apparent generosity of the white man. The natives were not worried by this state of affairs until village celebrities began to endorse the alien religion and education.

Some celebrities joined the Europeans out of curiosity, some to unravel the magic of their art, while others joined them apparently as a result of their anticipation that possible good might result from the European's arrival sometime in the distant future. Some Igbo celebrities, even Chief Priests of local cults, rather than joining themselves, sent their children instead. The idea of sending children to find out the mysteries of the European religion later became a problem for the Igbos since the children sent were not content with merely serving as representatives of their families. Rather, they embraced the colonial education and religion with pride and satisfaction. Thus, the Igbos watched with amazement as their children gradually became assimilated into the alien culture and began to question the authenticity of Igbo culture and its belief system.

The long-term effect of the European sojourn in Igboland was that it brought into conflict another set of cultural values with those of the Igbo people. The Portuguese arrived at the Niger Delta around 1470, came into contact with the Igbo people, and an alien culture was thrust into the midst of the Igbos. Though the sojourn of the Portuguese was short-lived, it heralded the coming of other European colonialists. The colonizers sought to force their own culture on the Igbos, thus placing Igbo culture in double jeopardy. Regarding the

effect of this on the masquerade performance, one notices that the arrival of the Europeans led to events which necessitated the transition of the masquerade performances from their ritual practices to entertainment.

This paper seeks to examine the various situations that caused the aesthetics and performance methods of Igbo festival masquerade performances to change from ritual to entertainment. It also seeks to show how these changes caused the masquerade rituals to be stripped of their mythic, religious, and social components leaving behind the carcass of Igbo ritual good only for entertainment. Finally, this paper seeks to establish that the shift to entertainment led to the establishment of professional groups and the professionalization of the masquerade performances in Igbo villages.<sup>2</sup>

### Slave Trade and Slave Raids

The first consequence of the European intrusion into Igboland was slave trade. Elizabeth Isichei maintains that the Igbos were sold into slavery "throughout the whole period of the trade, from the first recorded Ibo slave -- one Caterina Ybou, sent to São Tomé -- until the slave trade came to an end in the middle years of the nineteenth century."<sup>3</sup> Slave trade invaded the peace of the hinterland and devastated the Igbo world; a world which "lies protected by the spirits of the dead, in harmony with itself, and in tune with the seasonal cycles of rain and drought, death and disease; a social order that is accepted with fatalism, whether it is decreed from above, or wrought from below."<sup>4</sup>

The Igbos were probably one of the ethnic groups in West Africa that suffered most from the impact of slave trade. Historical records show that the number of Igbos sold as slaves was really staggering compared with other ethnic groups in West Africa. There have been speculations and counter speculations about the number of Igbos sold as slaves, but Captain Adams, a naval officer who made ten voyages to Bonny port in Nigeria between the years 1786 and 1800, gives us an idea of what the authentic figure might have been. Adams insists that "over 20,000 slaves were sold annually at Bonny alone, 16,000 of them Igbo."<sup>5</sup> He claims that within twenty years period, 320,000 Igbos were sold in Bonny, while another 50,000 were sold at Calabar.

Most of the slaves were procured through raids, as has been revealed in interviews of slaves. The slaves were mainly kidnapped during periods of celebration and festivity. Different methods were employed by the Igbos to prevent slave traders from capitalizing on the absence of adults in the village to kidnap young people for sale as slaves. Olaudah

Equiano, in his narrative, discloses the various ways employed by Igbo youths of his days to prevent assailants or kidnappers from making a successful raid in their villages. The effectiveness of such methods can be measured from the fact that Equiano himself was kidnapped and "carried off when none of the grown up people were nigh."<sup>6</sup>

The Igbos discovered, to their dismay, that while they made plans to prevent slave raiders from successful operations in their villages, the raiders themselves made counter plans to off-set the plans of the village watchdogs. The masquerade performances provided an excellent opportunity for slave raiders. Because the performances were held near the cemetery, at the outskirts of the village, slave raiders from other areas found the performance period an excellent time to go out and kidnap people in the village. When the situation became unbearable, the village elders decided to bring the festivals down to the village to prevent such occurrences. Squares were built in the heart of the villages for these performances. The Oda, shrinehouse of the masquerade ritual, was erected at the village square and performances in the cemetery were abandoned. By moving all the ritual performances to the village square, the villages had complete control over the events taking place in the village and at the same time executed their ritual duties.

The movement from the cemetery to the village square marked a very important shift in the effectiveness of the masquerade ritual. By shifting the place of performance to the village square, the ritual lost a major segment of its virtue. Tight secrecy which was assured when the performances took place at the cemetery gave way to loose secrecy when the performances were shifted to the village square. The proximity of the village square to people's houses created the danger of non-initiates accidentally running into some secrets of the ritual.

Slave trade also robbed the Igbo villages of important experts in traditional affairs, experts trained in the secrets and manoeuvres of ritual performances. It led to the training and re-training of members, and eventually to the lowering of the age limit for admittance and initiation into the masquerade society. Thus Igbo youths had to be admitted into the secrets of the incarnate dead at a younger age, and this increased the danger of the youths surrendering the secrets of the ritual to the uninitiated.

#### Effects of Missionary Enterprises in Igboland

Another very important factor in the transition of Igbo masquerade performances from cult to theatre is the effect of

missionary enterprises in Igboland. Evidently, colonization started before the advent of missionary enterprises, but it was not until the missionaries joined forces with the colonial administration that strong attacks were launched on Igbo tradition and culture from both sides.

Early missionaries and early colonizers in Igboland appeared to be the same in the sense that both saw the Igbos as fraught with superstition and ignorance, their religion bordering on heathenism, and their intelligence defective. Both missionaries and colonizers believed that their major task was to "civilize" the natives and make them think "sensibly." And to think "sensibly," they had to think the British way. The major difference between the church and the colonial administration at that time, it appears, was that while the colonial administration spat vinegar and brandished the sword before the Igbos, the church also spat vinegar, albeit coated with saccharine, and carried the sword in the right hand while brandishing the Bible in the left. Because they brandished the Bible and concealed the sword, it was easier for the natives to consider the church as the lesser of two evils. Thus they welcomed the missionaries with cautious hospitality.

The hospitality was short-lived. However, the early missionaries were unwilling to consider the efficacy of traditional religion. Rather, they believed that the quickest way of converting the natives was to make a direct frontal attack on their traditional life, religion and culture. Commenting on the status of the early missionaries, Ian Brook observes that they were "for the most part men and women of simple faith and little education, strong in their conviction that the way of redemption for all men lay only in Christianity."<sup>7</sup> Brook admits that the evils brought by these early missionaries "probably far outweighed the good they did."<sup>8</sup>

The missionaries may have anticipated some problems with the Igbo people and planned several methods of achieving their aim. Igbo resistance to the missionary upsurge was a temporary success because of the weakening effect of rivalry among the different religious groups. The Igbos were particularly unhappy with the understanding that ritual incantations were being replaced with religious impedimenta. This was apparent in the behaviour of Igbo converts. The Igbos believed that the aim of the missionaries was to uproot Igbo culture. They were dismayed that even their own people who were now converts were abandoning Igbo folk aphorisms and traditional lore in favour of incomprehensible alien incantations. As F.K. Ekechi states in his monumental work, Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland,

*At a time when many Igbo converts were responding to*

*missionary appeals to abandon their traditional life, different interest groups in the society saw that their continued well-being was at stake if Christianity was allowed to subvert the society. For this reason the dibias, secret societies (especially members of the collective incarnate dead), and associations of titled men offered stiff opposition to the continuation of missionary work in the country.<sup>9</sup>*

While the Igbos thought they were eliminating the influences of the alien religion from their midst, little did they know that they were creating more problems for these traditions and culture which they were trying to protect. Opposition by the natives, strengthened by strong rivalry among the religious groups, caused the missionaries to scramble to convert village chiefs who were, with the co-operation of the colonial administration, sometimes given totalitarian powers which they were supposed to wield among the natives.

The conversion of chiefs to Christianity was not an easy task. Some of the chiefs made very difficult demands which the religious sects attempted to fulfill, if the chief would agree to convert to Christianity, join the missionary effort, and wield the much-needed power among the natives. An example of this difficulty is seen in the conversion of the Olu of the Jekris. Ian Brook reports that

*Jesuit priests had in the seventeenth century converted the ruler of the Jekris, the Olu, to Christianity. The Olu had made it a condition of his conversion that he should be provided with a white wife. The Jesuits, with their usual resource, went to the Island of St. Thome, a Portuguese island off the West African Coast, and brought back with them a white woman as the Olu's bride . . .<sup>10</sup>*

The chiefs usually picked for conversion by the missionaries were men who were highly respected in society, men who held the staff of office in the traditional society, men whose conversion would prompt other subjects to convert also.

It was not until 1889 that the missionaries scored a very big success in Igboland. This was when a Catholic priest, Reverend Father Bubendorf, started a careful conversion of Chief Idigo of Aguleri, a very important Igbo chief. Chief Idigo was one of the few chiefs who had taken the highest chieftancy title in his area of Igboland. He was the custodian of his society's tradition and culture and was highly respected. Although Father Bubendorf's discussions with Chief Idigo started in 1889, it was not until December 3, 1891 that the Chief finally gave up his traditional titles and along with members of

his family. He became christened Samuel and handed over all traditional paraphernalia under his custody to the missionaries for destruction. The conversion of such an important leader was memorable. It came at the time the missionaries were disturbed by the fact that the congregation consisted mainly of the poor and the rejected people in society.<sup>11</sup>

The early Christian converts, as has already been noted were slaves, some of whom were bought by the missionaries themselves. These men were dedicated to the oracles and were needed in the performance of certain ritual sacrifices. Their duty was to serve the oracles especially in areas where the services of the free-born were not required. When a large number of this group of people joined the church, the oracles lost their dedicated servants. As a result, some of the practices in the rituals had to be modified to exclude this category of servants. This broke the uniformity of the ritual performances. People, especially non-initiates, began to realize that the rituals which were believed to have been initiated by the ancestors could after all be changed by the living.

Early missionary propaganda did not have much impact on the Igbos. Only those who needed protection responded positively to the call of the missionaries, and because they were protected, as the missionaries pledged, more needy people joined the fold. The more these outcasts joined the church, the more they shocked the apparently free natives who could not stand the indignation of being in the same congregation with slaves and lepers.

One of the earliest missionaries in Igboland, Reverend Taylor, confirmed in his journal entry of November 29, 1863, that the early Igbo converts "were slaves purchased by the missionaries or others who suffered from some social disabilities."<sup>12</sup> Taylor maintains that the hard core of the early church congregation consisted of lepers, widows, and a variety of others of their ilk. Finding themselves protected by the church and indirectly under latent protection by the colonial administration, the converts became fanatics and began to disrespect the traditional society. The converts' efforts to pay back their mentors with obedience and service, strengthened by their desire to harm the society that had maltreated them, and reinforced by some religious protocols like confession, caused the converts to surrender the secrets of the incarnate dead not only to the missionaries but to the entire congregation. Because those who betrayed the ancestors and released their secrets escaped the wrath of the Igbo gods, others began to believe that the European's God was probably "superior" to those of the Igbos. This realization made the converts to grow more fanatic and caused more converts to be won by the church. Gradually, the converts grew in population and power,

and began not only to defy masquerades but to openly and physically challenge them.

While Igbo converts were respecting the invincibility of the European's God, Igbo people and the missionaries were engaged in battle. This battle caused the Igbos to deny the missionaries permanent settlement in many areas of Igboland by refusing to give them a plot of land to build their "shrine." Where the request of the missionaries for a plot of land was granted at all, the people deliberately gave them the sacred groves which were believed to be impenetrable by the living. The aim of this was to cause the wrath of the gods to descend on the missionaries and thus assure their latent extermination. Unfortunately, what was intended to hurt the missionaries turned into a devastating boomerang. The missionaries, with the assistance of some Igbo converts went ahead and cleared the sacred bush and confidently erected their "shrine." Nothing happened to either the missionaries or the Igbo converts who assisted them. The Igbos interpreted this to mean that the European's god was invincible after all, and this caused the church to win more converts. The missionaries capitalized on this interpretation of the invincibility of their god to inflict more damage to Igbo belief system. Some religious denominations started requiring their converts to reveal their past activities to the entire congregation. This involved revealing the secrets of the incarnate dead to the uninitiated. Some missionaries even demanded that their converts bring for public destruction their charms, and all other things that still tied them with the traditional religion. Igbo converts watched in wonderment as some of things they once held sacred went up in flames before the European's "shrine."

The confidence which the converts acquired through the supposed invincibility of the European's god made them attack Igbo oracles and shrines with impunity. The masquerade was a victim of this unprovoked attack. Some of the converts who were formerly members of the secret society desired to prove to the non-initiates in the village that the masquerade was actually not a spirit. These converts were aware that "one of the greatest crimes a man could commit was to unmask an egwugwu (masquerade) in public or to say or do anything which might reduce its immortal prestige in the eyes of the uninitiated."<sup>13</sup> But now that they were under the protection of the invincible alien god, the converts committed this crime with impunity in their efforts to prove Igbo rituals fraudulent and to destroy the authenticity of the masquerade performances.

Some of the overzealous missionaries also inflicted physical assault on Igbo cults. Their belief was that extermination of Igbo cults was the easiest way of achieving mass conversion of Igbos into Christianity. The Odas, stagehouse of the mas-

querade performances, fell victim of this kind of destruction. Government ethnographer and Antiquities Officer, Philip Nsugbe, recalls the case of Reverend Father O'Kieve of the Catholic mission, a fanatic ecclesiastical fetish destroyer who "periodically carried out religious campaigns of mass destruction by the burning of cult objects in various parts of Iboland."<sup>14</sup> Father O'Kieve was believed to have burnt a large number of Igbo oracle houses, ranging from masquerade houses to sacred groves. Nsugbe reveals that Reverend Father O'Kieve stopped the destruction only when the Nigerian Department of Antiquities stepped in to save Igbo ancestral objects and fetishes for its own use. Such was the seriousness of missionary efforts to exterminate Igbo religion and belief system. Once the secrets of the masquerade rituals became open and the ritual purity of the performances became punctured, the sacredness of the festivals began to disappear.

#### Effects of Colonization on Igbo Masquerade Performances

The effects of missionary onslaught on the masquerade performances was worsened by the attempt of the colonial government to establish a system of justice in Igboland. The masquerade was regarded as the final arbiter in serious matters in almost all areas of Igboland. The colonial government, on the other hand, also brought a system of justice which they to force on the Igbos. The Igbos rejected the colonial system of justice which they considered ineffective in solving problems in the traditional Igbo society.

One major reason for Igbo rejection of colonial judicial system was that it placed justice in the hands of mortals. The Igbos believed that most human beings were liars and could tell the truth only when they were brought face to face with ancestral spirits. They believed that human deliberation on certain cases would be ineffective because human beings have a tendency to tell lies to mortals. The colonial government, rather than making efforts to discern the relationship between the Igbos and their ancestors, or to employ some flexibility in their dealings with the Igbos, invoked His Majesty's judicial protocol and sought to force them down the throats of Igbo natives in doses of unquestionable dogmas.

Intolerance of native custom on the part of the colonial government caused the Igbos to defy the colonialists. It also caused the colonial administration to return the defiance with brute force. In many areas of Igboland, this resulted in physical exchange of fracas fire. The result of this was that the masquerade ceased temporarily to administer justice openly in order to guard against detection by the agents of colonial administration. But the consequence was obvious. Recourse to more powerful oracles like the Agbala of Awka and the Ibini

Ukpabi of Arochukwu became more popular. As agents of the oracle of Ibini Ukpabi, the Aros increased in popularity and dominated trade in southeastern Nigeria. Awka people, because of the Agbala oracle, became more popular and more dominant in their own area of Igboland. This trade dominance hurt the economy of the colonial government and they fought the oracles with even more vehemence. Walter Ofonagoro has observed that "the colonial government of southern Nigeria considered the destruction of Aro trade dominance in the hinterland essential to the opening up of the hinterland to British rule."<sup>15</sup> To achieve this, the colonialists believed, a complete destruction of the oracles was paramount.

The colonial office, with the help of the military, carried out an expedition against the Ibini Ukpabi of Arochukwu in 1901, and against the Agbala of Awka two years later. The oracles were destroyed and heavy casualties were inflicted on the defenders of the oracles. The ring leaders were arrested and publicly executed. The degree of preparation made by the colonial office suggests the extent of resistance they expected from the Aros. T.N. Tamuno<sup>16</sup> records that 1,745 officers and men were engaged in the expedition which began in November 1901 and ended on March 23, 1902. Led by Lt. Col. A.F. Montanaro, the Field Force "comprised a regiment from Northern Nigeria, a battalion from England, and all troops in the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria."<sup>17</sup> They were believed to have been accompanied by twenty eight members of the administrative staff of the protectorate, most of whom were Igbo. Despite reports of serious fighting at the destruction of the Arochukwu oracle, Frank Hives of the colonial office has a different story. In his book Juju and Justice in Nigeria (co-authored with Gascoigne Lumley), he insists that there was no actual fighting at the destruction of the oracle, but confirms that the oracle was destroyed by the colonial government's army. "The oracle," Hives and Lumley insist, "was destroyed, the juju . . . stamped out of existence -- discredited by the failure of its supposed powers to protect itself."<sup>18</sup>

In order to completely stamp out the oracle, the colonial office had ordered the destruction of everything that went with the oracles including the complete burning of the shrines and fetishes. The colonial administration was aware of the confidence the Igbos reposed in their oracles. They believed that if anything was left undestroyed, the natives would think that the oracle had succeeded in protecting itself. It was a battle to destroy the shrines that withheld justice and respect from the colonial government. It was also a battle to destroy the entire belief system of the Igbos and turn them completely from their cultural and socio-religious beliefs. It was an effort to expose the secrets of the secret societies to the general public, to put an end to the reverence the Igbos placed in

their oracles and rituals, and to make them look with suspicion and disdain at their culture.

Frank Hives, who claimed to have led the destruction of the Afor Alum oracle, reiterates his efforts to see that any possible respect for the oracle was destroyed, hence he went as far as destroying the animals found at the sight of the oracle. He describes the final campaign in the following terms:

*. . . We went under so that we could see through the branches, and counted eight good sized monkeys . . . A few shots from a rifle ended their careers, whatever these had been. I did not do this killing from pure wantonness, but because the animals were a part and parcel of the juju we had come to destroy. If they had been left, the natives who knew about them would have interpreted it to mean that the juju had been strong enough to protect them, and that was the last thing I wished.*<sup>19</sup>

This kind of destruction not only inflicted heavy losses in terms of material and wealth on the part of the Igbos but also made them lose confidence in their formerly much-respected ancestral spirits. Until the coming of the British, the Igbos had believed in the invincibility of their ancestors and the utilitarian functions of the rituals. They had believed in the relationship between the requests they made to their ancestors through the masquerade and the eventual outcome; revered the jealous way in which the ancestral spirits protected their lives and inflicted heavy punishment on people who desecrated the land. But the coming of the Europeans had changed everything. Their ancestors, they thought, were now incapable of protecting themselves against people who inflicted heavy physical assaults on them, against people who desecrated the land, and people who committed abominations. The belief of even the most dedicated villagers began to decline.

#### Destructive Effects of Political Appointments: The Warrant Chief System

The evolution of the Warrant Chief system by the colonial administration was added to the problem of mass destruction of Igbo oracles and cults, and the shrinking belief and dedication of the people. The selection of the Warrant Chief of a village was arbitrarily done by the political officer to the colonial office.

Oral tradition collected in Igboland<sup>20</sup> has revealed that the manner of selection of the chiefs was improper. The political officer, when he visited a village to select a Warrant Chief, did not consider the sociology of the particular village

or the society's leadership idiosyncrasies. Rather, he considered minor things like physical features as the main yardstick for selection. In Oraukwu, for instance, a man was reported to have been selected as a Warrant Chief because of his imposing personality, and because he had brought a stool along with him during the meeting called by the political officer. The officer may have been impressed by the fact that the man sat on a stool while others sat on bare ground. He thus selected and made him the Warrant Chief, despite the fact that the man was considered by the villagers as one of the reckless young men in the society.

Furthermore, the political officer did not explain to the villagers the importance of the Warrant Chieftancy appointment. This lack of communication made some villages in Igboland to nominate the wrong people for this important assignment. For instance, when the political officer requested some villages to present a man to him, most of the villages did not understand that the man so presented would be their chief. Judged from past experience where the person presented to the colonial office was punished as a village representative for the misdeeds of the village, most villages thought that the request from the political officer would afford them the opportunity of eliminating criminals and worthless men in the village. So, rather than presenting their important men, they presented criminals and worthless men to the political officer and rejoiced at their own apparent wisdom. They were amazed when these criminals returned a few weeks later with a warrant from the colonial office which officially recognized them as their chief. As a result, most of the warrant chiefs were in conflict with the villages they were supposed to rule.

Some warrant chiefs maltreated their subjects. The powers of the chiefs were mild towards their Christian subjects because the missionaries had 'subterreanean' power in the administration of the colonies. As a result, when the people were maltreated by a totalitarian warrant chief, they found succour in the protection of the church. Thus, more people deserted the traditional religion and joined the church.

The Warrant Chief system also brought internal strife in the organization of secret societies. Some Igbo societies did not accept their warrant chiefs, and ignored them in matters relating to traditional ritual. Rather, they consulted their recognized chief who, in most areas of Igboland, was usually the *ichie*, the oldest man in the village. Thus, some villages considered the warrant chief as the "white man's chief" and the real local chief as the custodian of tradition and culture in their society. The warrant chiefs objected to this kind of treatment and sought to more firmly establish their authority in the villages. The result was a division between the sup-

porters of the warrant chiefs and those of the traditional village chiefs. Ritual performances in the villages became divided and eventually lost further effectiveness. The effect of political appointment was the final nail that sealed the coffin of the virtue of Igbo ritual in many societies in Igbo-land.

#### Masquerade Performances After the Transition (A Shift from Cult to Theatre)

Due to the problem already outlined, the masquerade performances were eventually forced to gradually lose its efficacy when its main functions were removed. The stiff measures used by the colonial administration against dissidents caused the Igbos to reluctantly conform to the wishes of the administration by stripping from their performances everything the administration had objected to. The decision brought peace between the Igbos and the colonial administration, but seriously hurt the potency of the masquerade ritual. Stripping the performances of the objectionable functions meant puncturing the virtue of the ritual, and thus changing the intent of the performances and performers.

Intent, obviously, is the major difference between ritual and entertainment. The ritual of the incarnate dead, with its accompanying incantations, may be dramatic or entertaining without necessarily being drama or entertainment. Ritual being the transformation of the belief system of a people into practical action, the intent of the incarnate dead, after the transition, departed from belief in the performances to simple entertainment. In the ancient Igbo society, the masquerade performances were aimed at accomplishing results. The intent of the natives was to communicate their wishes to the ancestors so they could help in causing certain things to happen -- to stop a plague or to bring rain, for instance. The Igbos believed in the efficacy and impartiality of the masquerade. By invoking the masquerade as a final judge, the Igbos believed that they were invoking the ancestor who was symbolized in the masquerade, hence there was no appeal to such judgement. When judgement passed into the hands of the colonial administration, and since the masquerade was no longer invoked to intercede for the living in periods of hardship, the intent shifted to audience appeal and pleasure thus giving rise to entertainment.

The masquerade ritual, as carried out in the pre-colonial Igbo society, did not, of necessity, require a human audience as does theatre. As a condition of performance, theatrical productions require a human audience. In the masquerade performance, especially in rituals performed to cleanse the society or to request some help from the ancestors, the audience is the supernatural power being addressed. Both the masquerades, the

dancers, and the people present at the ritual ceremony were the same in the sense that their intent was the same -- to communicate with supernatural forces in order to change the course of events. The people who stood at the shrines during the performances should not be seen as a passive audience but as passive actors. Their major intent, along with that of the active performers, was to woo the ancestors in order to achieve specific results. Thus, they may be onlookers to the ritual being performed but not its audience.

The demands of the living were clearly communicated to the supernatural forces through the ancestral spirits who in this case were the masquerades. It was necessary that the ritual should be properly performed so the desired results could be achieved. To perform the ritual properly required dramatic activity but this was not meant for entertainment but as a sample of the kind of result which the people expected from supernatural forces. The necessity to ask for the help of the ancestors also created the necessity to thank them for performing the requested duties, and hence the cyclic dramatic ritual continued in the traditional Igbo society.

Stripping the performances of the components abhorred by both church and state transformed the nature of the performances. The intent of the performances shifted from the expectation of results from supernatural forces to expectation of reaction from a human audience, onlookers became audience rather than passive actors, and collective responsibility gave way to individual creativity. Speeches which were in the nature of incantations decorated with folk aphorisms and stock speeches of the traditional society, turned to individually created topical proverbs which appealed to the audience. Concatenation of cliches emphasizing incantations which would be recited faithfully gave way to verbal statements created to foster audience appreciation of the proceeding. The ritual performer in a collective group became a dramatic actor in an entertainment group. Acting out rituals intended as samples of results which the natives expected from the supernatural forces gave way to dramatic activities portraying "the world that the Igbos have inherited, by acting out stereotypes of virtue and beauty, ugliness and ferocity, cunning and intrigue and so on."<sup>12</sup> Emphasis shifted from pacification and cleansing to entertainment and pleasure, and talent, rather than traditional expertise, became the over-riding principle.

The main situation that completed the transition of the performances from ritual to entertainment was the re-enactment of social conflicts. This started with the evolution of various dramatic expressions re-enacting the conflicts between the Igbo people and the Europeans. Dramatic expressions were enacted whereby the Europeans were reviled and even softly

abused. This enactment served as a catharsis that helped the Igbo to overcome their anger and adjust to the new state of things. This exercise involved the creation of fictional characters and the acting out of topical societal conflicts presented to an audience in a performance, to create an illusion of life. This gave rise to the presentation of masquerade performances as enactment. The maturation of this enactment, and the need to address more topical issues when the conflict with the Europeans became monotonous, led the performance groups to search the society and find areas of conflict for ridicule and satire. One of the earliest songs composed at this period of social conflict begins in the following manner:

*The dibia (native doctor) is wizard of roots. But now the masses have known the roots . . . Everyone has seen the contents of the dibia's bag! Have you seen what the white man has done to us? Have you seen what the white man has done to us in this world?*<sup>22</sup>

This song of lamentation by the Ogbonma masquerade group of Umukwa village in Awka, now waxed in stereo phonograph, was composed during the period of transition and is now used by the group as an opening glee for the masquerade performance. The song, followed by a few flashes of pantomime, communicates, or rather reminds the audience that the masquerade performance has become entertainment, that this was not supposed to be the function of the masquerade, and that the masquerade was forced to assume the function of entertainment due to the machinations of the European colonizers.

Adjustment to the new cultural situation also meant adjusting the operation of the secret societies whose secrets and virtue have now been abrogated. Kaj Birket-Smith observes that what all cultures have in common is that "they have to adapt themselves to the conditions under which they live."<sup>23</sup> For the masquerade performances to adapt to the new method, changes had to be made in production method.

The first of such changes was the take over of the performances by age grades. Igbo age grades are made up of young men born within a three-year period. The fact that Igbo societies observed between two and three years postpartum sex taboo made it possible for siblings to be easily identified according to age. Richard N. Henderson, who carried out a research among the Onitsha Igbo, has confirmed that "the period of this taboo coincides closely with the span of Onitsha age-sets."<sup>24</sup> In the modern setting, Igbo age-sets are still organized in three year groups, but women of the same age are now incorporated into the age-sets, and the ages of the members are now determined through official records.

The success achieved in the handling of the performances by the age sets made the village leaders to consider taking over the performances in many parts of Igboland. Because the resources of the age sets were usually meagre, it was believed that the performances would be better managed if the resources of the village were injected into the performances to make them more articulate and entertaining. The village elders were responsible, after the take-over, for the appointment of the group leader (onye ishi ora). In some areas, two leaders were appointed by the elders -- one took charge of directing the performance while the other was in charge of logistics. The take-over of the performances by the villages created competition among rival villages, and added novelty and creativity into each performance.

After the appointment of the leaders by the village elders, the leaders summon a meeting of the village youths. In this meeting, the assistant leaders were selected, and the cast chosen. Often, parts were double cast and the two aspirants competed with each other. Villagers who were proficient in a particular art, like music, song, and dance, were called in, and the other existing positions were filled from a try-out involving village volunteers. Simon Ottenberg, who researched on Afikpo masquerades, observed that

*Some weeks before the play is to be given, the two leaders start recruiting persons to take part. Crucial to the success of the play is their selection of two assistant leaders, the musicians, the principal singers, and the actors. These are located among known friends and relatives. Knowledge that a play is to be performed soon spreads among the village men, and some volunteers come forward.<sup>2 5</sup>*

The masquerader was usually chosen by the elders. Sometimes the leaders were permitted to make the choice. Often a particular masquerader acts for a long time, especially since the masquerade costume must have been constructed from his measurement. Ability to remain in the village always, be in constant state of good health, and be prepared to co-operate any time he was called upon, were some of the major qualities the elders looked for in selecting the masquerader.

The performances were made to be very creative and the organizers were men of excellent organizational ability. The interest of the audience was solicited during the performances and this makes the organizers search the society for interesting and topical issues that would be dramatized in the performances. The search for topical issues and the need to vary the performances in order to hold the interest and attention of the audience further created the need for the villages to organize a

group of men permanently charged with the responsibility for the organization of the performances. Furthermore, since the performances were held in all villages, competition arose among the different villages. The masquerade performances, therefore, became a yardstick for measuring not only the creativity of a village but its organizational ability. Because money was fundamental to a successful performance, and since money was collected by the villages for the purchase of costumes, props, and other accoutrements, an excellent performance was an indication of the ability of the village to take care of its internal affairs. Writing about the organization of masquerade performances in Afikpo, Simon Ottenberg rightly observes that

*. . . the manner in which a play is performed is symbolic of the state of the village's organization; it is a public record of the level of social cohesion in the settlement. A sense of community spirit is highly desired in Afikpo and a poor performance indicates to outsiders a lassitude, a lack of interest in village affairs, or perhaps deeper problems or conflicts.*<sup>26</sup>

Since the prestige of the village was at stake during each performance, the villages organized a group of talented men who went to performances staged by other villages to evaluate the aesthetic and artistic merits of these performances. Their report was utilized by the village in polishing their own performances and standing the competition of other villages.

The take-over of the performances by the village professionals caused the performances to achieve greater development in creativity and aesthetics. It also caused the christian converts to take interest in the performances. Christians now regard the performances as entertainment which has jettisoned everything in it that would provoke religious opposition. A prominent Igbo chief, and an ardent christian, Chief (Obi) Anthony Modebe, interviewed on the relationship between the masquerade and the church strongly maintained: "We regard the masquerade as a play -- I mean, something to make the town warm, something to enjoy."<sup>27</sup> This represents the view of most avant-garde christians in Igboland and explains why the masquerade performances now feature in christian celebrations, especially Christmas and Easter celebrations. In many parts of Igboland, christians now audition for selection as masqueraders. When selected, these christian members of the collective incarnate dead see themselves as actors imitating and impersonating a character. Christian involvement in the masquerade performances marked the final secularization of the performances.

Now that entertainment is the main intent of the perfor-

mances and performers, efforts are made by different village professional groups to increase their purse in order to improve the quality of the performances. The groups now take part in western-oriented programmes like Festivals of the Arts. The inclusion of masquerade performances in these festivals marks the recognition by the government that masquerade drama is art, and can stand in competition with other arts of its kind. Thus the audience scope of the performances have broken the boundaries of traditional villages and extended to the entire society, even attracting the interest and attention of scholars who have a sensitive eye for what is new and creative in the performing arts. The performance groups now exploit modern technology to increase both the weight of their purse and the scope of their audience. They now appear on television shows and some of their songs appear on record albums.

It is evident, from the foregoing, that Igbo festival masquerade performances faced very strong opposition from both church and state. It is also clear that this opposition led to physical assault and destruction of both the ritual cults, and fetishes; and the performance rituals reluctantly succumbed to the pressures and became stripped of their virtue when their efficacy was punctured. The transition from cult to theatre, as has been discussed, started with the dramatization of social conflicts and the pantomimic abuse of Europeans. Because it provided the Igbos with the much needed catharsis, the rituals of conflict were improved and extended to cover the realms of Igbo villages, and from there, developed into formal entertainment.

The transition from festival performance to entertainment mediated by financial transactions was a direct result of British colonialism and its need to change economic relationships as well as cultural activities. Despite the assault of the colonial state and the church, the elements of the traditional Igbo festival masquerade performance has survived only to satisfy the new conditions imposed by the demise of colonialism.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1958), pp. 124-125.

<sup>2</sup>These issues have been elaborately discussed in my doctoral dissertation, "From Ritual to Entertainment: A Study of the Theatrical Developments of Igbo Festival Masquerade Performances," Bowling Green State University, 1982, pp. 49-72.

<sup>3</sup>Elizabeth Isichei, The Ibo People and the Europeans: The Genesis of a Relationship to 1906 (New York: St. Martin's

Press, 1973), p. 45.

<sup>4</sup>Ernest A. Champion, "The Dual Commitment of Chinua Achebe," M.A. Thesis, Bowling Green State University, 1972, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup>Elizabeth Isichei, A History of the Igbo People (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p. 43. See also Philip Curtin's analysis in his book, The Trans Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), pp. 192-196.

<sup>6</sup>Paul Edwards (Ed), Equiano's Travels (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1967), p. 16.

<sup>7</sup>Ian Brook, The One-Eyed Man is King (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), p. 100.

<sup>8</sup>Ian Brook, p. 100.

<sup>9</sup>F.K. Ekechi, Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1972), p. 163.

<sup>10</sup>Ian Brook, p. 106.

<sup>11</sup>Information concerning Chief Idigo and Reverend Father Bubendorf was collected from oral tradition, and supported by F.K. Ekechi, Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland (London: Frank Cass, 1972), pp. 88-91.

<sup>12</sup>Taylor's Journal Entry for November 29, 1863, cited in F.K. Ekechi, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup>Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart, p. 131.

<sup>14</sup>Philip O. Nsugbe, Ohaffia: A Matrilineal Ibo People (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 102.

<sup>15</sup>Walter Ibekwe Ofonagoro, "The Aro and Delta Middlemen of Southeastern Nigeria and the Challenge of the Colonial Economy," Journal of African Studies, 3, 2(1976), p. 160.

<sup>16</sup>T.N. Tamuno, The Evolution of the Nigerian State (London: Longman Group Limited, 1972), p. 37.

<sup>17</sup>Tamuno, p. 37.

<sup>18</sup>Frank Hives and Gascoigne Lumley, Juju and Justice in Nigeria (London: John Lane and the Bradley Head Ltd., 1930), p. 21.

<sup>19</sup>Hives and Lumley, p. 21.

<sup>20</sup>A.E. Afigbo, "Oral Tradition and History in Eastern Nigeria," Parts I and II, African Notes, iii, 3(1966), and iv, 1(1966). See also, A.E. Afigbo, The Warrant Chiefs (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1972).

<sup>21</sup>J.S. Boston, Ikenga Figures Among the Northwest Igbo and Igala (Lagos: Federal Department of Antiquities Publication, 1977), p. 18.

<sup>22</sup>Ogene Ogbonma Masquerade Group, Umukwa Village, Awka (Sammy Sparkle Records, SSAS 01, 1978). Wordings translated by the author, and supported by personal interview with the masquerade group.

<sup>23</sup>Kaj Birket-Smith, Primitive Man and His Ways: Patterns of Life in Some Societies (Translated from the Danish by Roy Duffell). New York: The World Publishing Company, 1957, p. 13.

<sup>24</sup>Richard N. Henderson, The King in Every Man: Evolutionary Trends in Onitsha Ibo Society and Culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 353. For more information on Igbo Age Grades, see G.I. Jones, "Ibo Age Organization with Special Reference to the Cross River and North-eastern Ibo," Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 92, 2(July-December 1962), pp. 191-211.

<sup>25</sup>Simon Ottenberg, Masked Rituals of Afikpo: The Context of an African Art (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), p. 88.

<sup>26</sup>Simon Ottenberg, Leadership and Authority in an African Society (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971), p. 130.

<sup>27</sup>Elizabeth Isichei, Igbo Worlds: An Anthology of Oral Histories and Historical Descriptions (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1978), p. 153.