



Kpakpando Journal of History and International Studies

Cultural Festivals and Settlement of Disputes in Nnerim Ndugba, Isu Local Government Area: The Case of Oghu Masquerade, 1960-2010

Cynthia Offor Dike-Vitus

Department Of History and International Studies
Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria

Kpakpando Journal of History and International Studies: Vol. 1 no. 4 July, 2024. ISSN: 2437-1750

Abstract

Cultural festivals in Igboland and other parts of Nigeria are celebrated for the purpose of entertainment and other related issues, but in Nnerim Ndugba the purpose extends to adjudication and settlement of disputes and the acceptance of the verdicts. Therefore, this work is an attempt to highlight the Oghu Masquerade cultural festival and its adjudicative procedure in the settlement of disputes in Nnerim Ndugba, Isu L.G.A, Imo State. The work also covered the origin of the Oghu Masquerade, the various entertainment activities performed by the Masquerade. Similarly, the role played by the members during the induction of new members and influence from other agents of socialization like the church and Christianity Education were examined. Through analytical research, review of articles and journals, the activities of the Oghu festival and nature of its dispute resolution in Nnerim were studied. Finally, the work is of the view that the nature of dispute resolution and settlement through the mechanisms of the Oghu Masquerade is still effective as well as its entertainment function.

Keywords: Festivals, Dispute, Oghu Masquerade, Nnerim, Settlement of Disputes.

Introduction

Dispute is disagreement and argument over a thing, that involves laying claim over something by persons, communities or nations.¹ It is common among humans that one cannot live without having misunderstanding with each other. Thus, it is seen as part of human existence. It is like nature and man's shadow that moves everywhere with him and cannot be avoided.

² It is the pursuit of incompatible interest and goals by different people; though it causes damages but in most cases is needed to stop certain actions in the society. Most times, this natural and innate part of human life can only be resolved based on aspects of peoples culture. The primary aim of this work is to show case the importance of cultural festivals as alternative mechanism in settling dispute in traditional Igbo society.

Cultural festivals being an important aspect of the social life of a people are celebrated for entertainment and commemorated in the company of invited friends and guest for merry making, unity and peace.³ In Nnerim, festivals are regular occasions in the life of the people and it formed an integral part of the socio-cultural development of the community.

Nnerim-Ndugba is an autonomous community in Isu Local Government Area of Imo State. Traditionally, Nnerim consists of six (6) villages; Umudiojii, Umuokwaradim, Umuezeala, Umuduru, Umuokwaraoha and Umudioma.⁴ In Nnerim-Ndugba, the Oghu Masquerade is a cultural festival set aside by the people to mark the relaxation from the planting season in anticipation for harvest of crops and settlement of disputes involving members of the community and their neighbours.

The Oghu festival is celebrated in the month of June and terminates in August of every year with the "Ito Nkwa" ceremony which announces the commencement of the Oghu season.⁵

The Oghu Masquerade in the Earliest Times

The origin of the Oghu Masquerade is traced to Oguta Local Government area in Imo State, though with no exact date of establishment from where it spread to other communities. It is of note that a woman from Umuneafor kindred in Okworji village in Awomama brought the Masquerade from Oguta. Shortly, the Oghu festival came to Okwudor in Njaba L.G.A, old Umuaka community, old Amandugba, Umundugba,

Amurie, some parts of Ekwe community and then Nnerim-Ndugba, all in Isu Local Government Area.⁶

Historically, the women were the first to imbibe the cultural festival, but later it became a taboo for the women to be at the helm of affairs as the men took over from them. It is worthy to note, before this time influential young girls were inducted as members. Thus, they were known as the “Ada-Echere” and were the only females allowed to take part in the celebration of the festival.

The Emergence of the Oghu Masquerade

Nnerim-Ndugba is not the only community that performs the Oghu masquerade festival in Isu Local Government Area, as other communities celebrate the festival. The first stage of the Oghu season is the “Ito Nkwa” (commencement ceremony) which is ushered in by the Oghu vigil (Nwa Qhx Xzq) on the Eke market night by the night parade of the masquerade and members.⁷ The period is regarded as a special time for traditional social interaction, as the night vigil and the eventual Oghu festival days mark, the display of various instruments of cultural entertainment. All male members will be present to participate in the occasion with the

inclusion of the women initiate (Ada Echere). Visible at this season, are various kinds of Masquerade known as the “Egudo” that comes out for public entertainment and a special force for peaceful settlement of disputes in the community.

The Umundugba people invite friends and guest to witness and enjoy in the festival. Young people move around the community to witness the masquerade dance, and this formed the major part of the festival as they look forward for the season on home coming and social interaction.⁹

Induction of New Members

In Nnerim-Ndugba, every male child of the community automatically becomes a full member of the Oghu Masquerade on induction by the parents and are allowed to recite the slogan of the Masquerade (Okorosha). Parents were interested to have their sons inducted to avoid molestation, as non-members are molested and prohibited from getting involved in the exercise.⁹ On the induction day, the concerned parents of the intending members are expected to present to the community and the head of the masquerade cult some required food items, kegs of palm wine, cartons of beer, hot

drinks, two (2) laps of goat meat and cash payment.

In recent time, physical items are not required from intending members, but rather cash payment, as funds generated during the festival goes to community development. Interestingly, the hierarchy of leadership of the Oghu Masquerade stand as follows,

- i. Onye Ishi Oghu: The head of the Masquerade organization in the community and he must exhibit proven integrity. Meetings are held in his house pertaining to the activities of the organization.
- ii. Onyeakpa: These are messengers to the head of the Masquerade cult, as all information that relates to the smooth administration of the organization are handled by them.
- iii. Di-Nkwa: These are the protocol officers in-charge of the Masquerade dance and training.
- iv. Mmany-Ama: In the tradition of the Oghu Masqueraders, these are people in charge of the organization of the midnight celebration that precedes the early morning dance. This exercise starts at midnight with beating of drums and gongs, as

members move from house to house collecting gifts.

Entertainment of the Audience

The Oghu Masquerade season starts sixteen (16) days after the opening ceremony (Ito Nkwa) with display of various dancing skills to entertain the people by the head. All male inductees and members tactically display their dancing artistry in response to the rhythm of the musical instruments. The dancers are known as the Okorosha, with inclusion of the female member (Ada-Echere) who dance and move in circle as people spray money on them.¹¹

After the Okorosha, the Ebeleri a beautifully dressed Masquerade takes over the stage to entertain the people with display of its dancing skills, usually with a knitted costume made from ropes. The “Udoo”, another Masquerade takes over the stage to entertain the people and to bring the dance to a stop.

The season could last for a long period of time to accommodate all the series of the Oghu Masquerade dance. In Nnerim, after the opening ceremony, (Ishi Nne Ohu), other series of the Masquerade lie the youth Masquerade (Oghu Oganihu) and the Masquerade in charge of inspection of the

clearing of road and foot paths (Oghu Nwa Ole ata) etc come into play.

Oghu Masquerade and Settlement of Disputes

The Oghu Masquerade festival creates unity and peaceful co-existence among the Nnerim-Ndugba people as it was believed traditionally that people are not to be in any form of grudge or dispute with one another during the season. The villages that make up the community participate in the festival without minding the bitterness they had. Harsh or provoking words were not said to one's neighbours, quarrels are settled and defaulters pay fines which are collected by the Masquerades.

People are not expected to engage in any form of dispute or quarrels. Litigations are prohibited and disputes that proved difficult to settle through other channels and institutions are resolved by the Masquerade.¹²

Throughout the season, all forms of quarrelling, fighting and litigation are prohibited. Couples are forbidden to fight, and anyone found guilty of the highlighted offences are subjected to heavy punishment and sanctions. This is so because, the season is a period of peace and stability, a time of

great reunion, reintegration and cooperation among the people.

Disputes on land ownership and economic trees are often settled by the Masquerades, as it was believed in Nnerim-Ndugba that land belonged to the gods and ancestors whose appearance and performance played regulatory roles in the affairs of the living. Such regulatory roles include settlement of dispute and other functions which help in the maintenance of peace and order in the community.

In the pre-colonial time, the Masquerade was the only reliable means of settling disputes between warring individuals.¹³ The validity of the system was generally accepted by the people on the ground that Masquerades are spirits, and capable of knowing everything. Thus, even in things Fall Apart, the family of Uzowulu and that of Mgbafo accepted the verdict of the Masquerades.¹⁴

The system of settling disputes by the Oghu Masquerade in Nnerim Ndugba was democratic especially on land cases because the disputing individuals will be allowed to present their cases before the gathering of the Masquerades and the villagers at the village square. Thus, the said property is tied with palm frond or string of cloth to prevent the

disputants from accessing the land pending the outcome of the case. In such trials, the Oghu Masquerades asks the disputing parties to take an oath before the gathering of the community elders, villagers and the Masquerades present and mandated to say only the truth. The people believe that whatever is said before the gods through the instrumentality of the masquerades is final because the oath taken was associated with powers of dead spirits which is capable of dealing with any offender.

Therefore, the presence of the spirits (Masquerades) and consequences of telling lies instill fear in individuals. This has helped to avert fights and allow time for tempers to cool. In Nnerim, any Masquerade can perform this function, as his orders are respected without questions.

The Masquerade uses the palm frond as an important symbol in the resolution and settling of dispute. The palm frond attracts sacredness and has strong connotations with spirits. Hence, it is supernatural and represents peace. In Nnerim, if the palm frond is placed on a certain area in the community by the Oghu Masquerade, it indicates peace and harmony, an end to bitterness and dispute of any kind within the

community and its environs. In the case of Nnerim and Ekwe from the two communities placed palm fronds on the boundary that link the communities. Thus, indicating the need to make peace.¹⁵

Consequently, Disputes that emanates among the women folk over non adherence to cleaning of roads and footpath, the Oghu Masquerade is used to enforce the offenders to pay certain penalty, thereby serving as a means of restoring peace in the community. In many occasions, disputes over cultural issues as regards resources, inheritance, marriage rites or even burial rites were handled by the Oghu Masquerade.

Dispute caused by incest or desecration of the land is settled by appeasing of the gods through the Mechanism of the Oghu Masquerade. In some cases, depending on the dimension of the case, deep spiritual measures are taken to invoke ancestral powers to buttress the link the living have with the ancestors. Thus, the process of settling disputes through the instrumentality of the Oghu Masquerade would begin with general preparation that involves consultations, invitations sent to the appropriate persons, gathering of items needed in the process and choosing a date that

would not clash with community event, as the community interest is considered more important to that of an individual.¹⁶

Challenges from Other Agents of Socialization

The Oghu Masquerade festival, an important aspect of the social life of the Nnerim Ndugba people and a veritable instrument of peace is faced with challenges from agents of socialization like Christianity and Education. These challenges were as a result of misdirection, falsification of facts and ridicule from Western Civilization. The attainment of certain level of education is demonstrated by adhering to the tenets of Western values, and attention on culture and tradition began to wane.

Education has grossly reduced the level of attention which people give to issues that relate to African culture, custom and tradition. The introduction of education by Europe into Africa brought about the proliferation of western culture.¹⁷

This has being a challenge faced by the Oghu Masquerade festival in Nnerim as credence is no longer given to the culture and tradition of the people.

Christianity on its part has played erroneous role in reducing the interest of people on cultural activities, Nnerim Ndugba inclusive.

The introduction of Christian belief into the Igbo society and the emergence of dominations have further relegated our tradition to the background as the church now equals the Oghu Masquerade festival with idol practices.

Today, parents are no longer interested in having their children inducted as members of the Oghu Masquerade cult, and one hardly sees a woman initiate “Ada Echere dance or participate in the festival as a result of the effect from Christian belief.

Conclusion

It is an established fact that cultural festivals are an important aspect of the social life a people and also part of human existence. This is made manifest in the celebration of the Oghu Masquerade, which serve the purpose of entertainment and settling of disputes among members of the community. The step and medium of dispute settlement as shown in this work is an indication that disputes can be settled based on aspects of peoples culture. Thus, the adjudication procedure of the Oghu Masquerade involves the use of truth and not legal technicalities as in the court of law. The people are familiar with the process of adjudication due to the democratic nature,

where the disputing individuals are allowed to state their cases before all present.

However, in recent times the adjudication of disputes by the Oghu Masquerade was accused of selective justice because of several agents of socialization who maintained the Masquerade apply false method and favour whoever they want.

In spite of the challenges stated above, Oghu Masquerade has been able to maintain good ground in adjudication and settling of disputes among Nnerim-Ndugba people. Therefore, the culture should be promoted.

Endnotes

1. J. Crowther, Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary Oxford University Press.
2. D. Fancis, Peace and Conflict studies: An overview of Basic concepts in S.C Best (ed) introduction to peace and conflict studies in West Africa (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 2006) 20.
3. A. Alamezie, Traditions of Origin and Administration in Umundugba, Unpublished Pamphelt, 1984, 4.
4. R. Ogbuji, 65 years Retired Teacher, Oral Interview at Umudioji Nnerim.
5. D. Ogbuji, 80 years, Oral Interview at Umuokwaradum Nnerim
6. G. Nnamuka, 68 years Head of the Oghu Masquerade, Interview at Umudioji Nnerim.
7. Oral Interview with S. Ohanekwu and P. Anyiam at Umuduru Nnerim
8. H. Alamezie as in 3 above
9. E. Dike, 68 yyears Retired Civil Servant, Oral Interview at Umuezeala Nnerim.
10. B.U. Ike, Umundugba: The people and Institution. Vol 1 (Enugu: Emmy-Angel publishers, 1992) 8
11. B.U Ike..., 10
12. N. Uzoho, 70 years catechizer, Interview at Umudioji Nnerim
13. E. Amaobi, Orlu: The people and Institution (Owerri: Cel-Nez Publishing Co. Ltd, 2010)15.
14. C. Achebe, Things Fall Apart (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1958) 62
15. I. Lemoha, 78 years, Traditional Chief, Interview held at Umuduru Ekwe.
16. P. Nwadike, change and continuities in Socio-cultural History of Umundugba, Isu L.G.A 1970-2020. M.A Thesis Submitted to the Department of History and Diplomatic studies, University of Port Harcourt, May 2021.
17. O. Ozodi, the Nothingness of western culture, (Lagos: Niger Basin Printers, 2001) 17.