

The Igbo World and Its Art

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The Igbo world is an arena for the interplay of forces. It is a dynamic world of movement and of flux. Igbo art, reflecting this world-view, is never tranquil but mobile and active, even aggressive.

Ike, energy, is the essence of all things human, spiritual, animate and inanimate. Everything has its own unique energy which must be acknowledged and given its due. *Ike di na awaja na awaja* is a common formulation of this idea: "Power runs in many channels." Sometimes the saying is extended by an exemplifying coda about a mild and gentle bird, *obu*, which nonetheless possesses the power to destroy a snake. *Onye na nkie, onye na nkie* – literally, "everyone and his own" – is a social expression of the same notion often employed as a convenient formula for saluting *en masse* an assembly too large for individual greetings.

In some cultures a person may worship one of the gods or goddesses in the pantheon and pay scant attention to the rest. In Igbo religion such selectiveness is unthinkable. All the people must placate all the gods all the time! For there is a cautionary proverb which states that even when a person has satisfied the deity Udo completely he may yet be killed by Ogwugwu. The degree of peril propounded by this proverb is only dimly apprehended until one realizes that Ogwugwu is not a stranger to Udo but his very consort!

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It is the striving to come to terms with a multitude of forces and demands which gives Igbo life its tense and restless dynamism and its art an outward, social and kinetic quality. But it would be a mistake to take the extreme view that Igbo art has no room for contemplative privacy. In the first place, all extremism is abhorrent to the Igbo sensibility; but specifically, the Igbo word which is closest to the English word "art" is *nka*, and Igbo people do say: *Onye nakwa nka na-eme ka ona-adu iru*, which means that an artist at work is apt to wear an unfriendly face. In other words, he is excused from the normal demands of sociability! If further proof is required of this need for privacy in the creative process, it is provided clearly and definitively in the ritual seclusion of the makers of *mbari*, to which we shall return shortly.

But once made, art emerges from privacy into the public domain. There are no private collections among the Igbo beyond personal ritual objects like the *ikenga*. Indeed, the very concept of collections would be antithetical to the Igbo artistic intention. Collections by their very nature will impose rigid, artistic attitudes and conventions on creativity which the Igbo sensibility goes out of its way to avoid. The purposeful neglect of the painstakingly and devoutly accomplished *mbari* houses with all the art objects in them, as soon as the primary mandate of their creation has been served, provides a significant insight into the Igbo aesthetic value as process rather than product. Process is motion while product is rest. When the product is preserved or venerated, the impulse to repeat the process is compromised. Therefore the Igbo choose

to eliminate the product and retain the process so that every occasion and every generation will receive its own impulse and kinesis of creation. Interestingly, this aesthetic disposition receives powerful endorsement from the tropical climate which provides an abundance of materials for making art, such as wood, as well as formidable enemies of stasis, such as humidity and the termite. Visitors to Igboland are often shocked to see that artefacts are rarely accorded any particular value on account of age alone.

In popular contemporary usage the Igbo formulate their view of the world as: "No condition is permanent." In Igbo cosmology even gods could fall out of use; and new forces are liable to appear without warning in the temporal and metaphysical firmament. The practical purpose of art is to channel a spiritual force into an aesthetically satisfying physical form that captures the presumed attributes of that force. It stands to reason, therefore, that new forms must stand ready to be called into being as often as new (threatening) forces appear on the scene. It is like "earthing" an electrical charge to ensure communal safety.

The frequent representation of the alien district officer among traditional *mbari* figures is an excellent example of the mediating role of art between old and new, between accepted norms and extravagant aberrations. Art must interpret all human experience, for anything against which the door is barred can cause trouble. Even if harmony is not achievable in the heterogeneity of human experience, the dangers of an open rupture are greatly lessened by giving to everyone his due in the same forum of social and cultural surveillance. The alien district officer may not, after all, be a greater oddity than a local woman depicted in the act of copulating with a dog, and such powerful aberrations must be accorded tactful artistic welcome-cum-invigilation.

Of all the art forms, the dance and the masquerade would appear to have satisfied the Igbo artistic appetite most completely. If the masquerade were not limited to the male sex alone, one might indeed call it the art form *par excellence* for it subsumes not only the dance but all other forms – sculpture, music, painting, drama, costumery, even architecture, for the Ijele masquerade is indeed a most fabulously extravagant construction.

What makes the dance and the masquerade so satisfying to the Igbo disposition is, I think, their artistic deployment of motion, of agility, which informs the Igbo concept of existence. The masquerade (which is really an elaborated dance) not only moves spectacularly but those who want to

enjoy its motion fully must follow its progress up and down the arena. This seemingly minor observation was nonetheless esteemed important enough by the Igbo to be elevated into a proverb of general application: *Ada-akwu ofu ebe enene mmuo*, "You do not stand in one place to watch a masquerade." You must imitate its motion. The kinetic energy of the masquerade's art is thus instantly transmitted to a whole arena of spectators.

So potent is motion stylized into dance that the Igbo have sought to defeat with its power even the final immobility of death by contriving a funeral rite in which the bearers of the corpse perform the *abia* dance with their burden, transforming by their motion the body's imminent commitment to earth into an active rite of passage.

This body, appropriately transfigured, will return on festival or ritual occasions or during serious social crises, as a masquerade to participate with an enhanced presence and authority in the affairs of the community, speaking an esoteric dialect in which people are referred to as bodies: "The body of so-and-so, I salute you!"

Masquerades are of many kinds representing the range of human experience – from youth to age; from playfulness to terror; from the delicate beauty of the maiden spirit, *agbogho mmuo*, to the candid ugliness of *njo ka-oya*, "ugliness greater than disease"; from the athleticism of *ogolo* to the legless and armless inertia of *ebu-ebu*, a loquacious masquerade that has to be carried from place to place on the head of its attendant from which position it is wont to shout: Off we go! (*Ije abulu ufia!*); from masquerades that appear at every festival to the awesome ancestors that are enticed to the world by rare crises such as the desecration of a masked spirit; from the vast majority that appear in daytime to the dreaded invisible chorus, *ayaka*, and the night-runner, *ogbazulobodo*.

I hasten to add that the examples given above are merely localized impressionistic illustrations taken from my own experience of growing up in Ogidi in the 1930s and 1940s. There are variations from one village community to the next and certainly from one region of Igboland to another. Nothing here can do justice, for instance, to the extraordinary twin traditions of Odo and Omabe of the Nsukka region. To encounter an Omabe masquerade just descended from the hills for a brief sojourn in the world after an absence of three years, its body of tiny metal discs throwing back the dying lights of dusk, can be a truly breathtaking experience!

The awesomeness of masquerades has suffered in modern times. This is not due, as some imagine, to the explosion of the secret concerning what lies behind the mask. Even in the past the women merely pretended not to know! I remember as a child a masquerade whose name was *Omanu kwue* – meaning, “If you know, speak.” This was a dare, of course, and nobody was about to take up the challenge. But this masquerade was of such towering height that there was only one man in the whole of Ogidi, perhaps even in the whole world, who could carry it; the same man, incidentally, whose brief career as a policeman at the beginning of the century had left a powerful enough legend for him to be represented in his uniform in an

mbari house in faraway Owerri and simply called Ogidi.

In the past, knowing who walked within the mask did not detract from the numinous, dramatic presence of a representative of the ancestors on a brief mission to the living. Disbelief was easily suspended! The decline today is merely a symptom of the collapse of a whole eschatology. But at least in my dreams masquerades have not ceased to bring forth the panic terror of childhood.

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