

THE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF TRADITIONAL AFRICAN PERFORMANCE: THE DUAL FUNCTIONS OF AKWUBALIBA INCARNATE BEING OF IGALA

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ABSTRACT

The Igala worldview emphasizes life, death and life after death. The Igala hold firmly that the dead are not dead. They live in an immortal world where they advocate for the living. The Igala believe that the dead who are now the ancestors can reincarnate and are born again as babies, or may return to the world as masked spirits or incarnate beings. The *Akwubaliba* incarnate being is one of numerous incarnate beings in Igalaland. In Igala culture, incarnate beings are sacred and sacrosanct. They serve several functions one of which is social control. The *Akwubaliba* which means locust are young masked spirits or incarnate beings between the ages of ten to thirteen years. The *Akwubaliba* incarnate beings may number up to two hundred or more. Their appearance usually sends mothers and barren women into different types of psychological and emotional states. The essence of this paper is to explore the reasons for these two groups of women's emotional and psychological states during the outing of these young incarnate beings and the impact of such emotional and psychological states on the society.

PREAMBLE

In Igala, incarnate beings or masked spirits phenomenon is held in a high esteem. The Igala culture attaches strong spiritual essence to incarnate beings or masked spirits, as it is believed that they are the ancestral spirits that have come on a visit to their living offsprings in order to entertain sensitise, conscientize and admonish the living. In Igala worldview the incarnate being is sacrosanct. Sargent expresses that:

... the Igala masquerades (incarnate beings or masked spirits) are euphemistic expressions of the cult of the ancestors and physical representation of collective or individual ancestral figures ... these masquerades reflect the cultural, ethnographic and political reality of the Igala nation state. (17)

Also, describing the two classes of incarnate beings in Igala culture, Boston enunciates that:

In Igala masquerading ... there is a contrast between the portrayal of benign and attractive female spirits and that of fierce masculine spirits who epitomize the nation of aggression and uncontrollable power. (24)

In discussing the Igala views about the incarnate being entity, Miachi stresses that:

... incarnate beings are an important part and parcel of Igala thought and belief such that every sphere of Igala life, whether it is politics, religion, economy, or social activities, is influenced by incarnate beings and vice versa ... that all incarnate beings belong to the Ata in the Ata's position as the representative of the ancestors (198).

Miachi, goes further quoting Ata Igala as saying that:

Our incarnate beings are efficacious. They have coercive spiritual powers over the living and they can make or mar their present or future life. They have all the power of the dead which they are, and we give to them the regard and respect that we give to our living or dead elders, and, indeed, more. (198-199)

The secrecy of incarnate being is never divulged to women, children and uninitiated. In fact, any form of disrespect to the great ancestral spirits is sacrilegious and the consequences could be disastrous. In this vein, Illah asserts that:

Masquerade is one of the atavistic modes because it is believed to involve the return of an ancestral collectivity to partake with the living, apart from reincarnation through which the symbolic balance necessary for the regulation of social ethos is maintained between the living and the dead. Within this framework, every member of the living is a potential median agent in the sense that he must die and join the ancestors. (54)

The performances of incarnate beings in Africa vary from place to place, season to season and from one occasion to the other, but they have a lot in common in both their spiritual and social manifestations. In analyzing such sacred and social activities of incarnate beings performance among the Igbo, Nwabueze opines that:

In the ancient Igbo society, the masquerade performances were intended to accomplish result. The intention of the natives was to communicate their wishes to the ancestors in order to change the state of things. The Igbo believed in the efficacy and impartiality of the masquerade. By involving the masquerade as a final judge, the ancestors were symbolized in the masquerade (60)

Among the Igala and perhaps their related ethnic groups in Nigeria, incarnate beings perform several distinctive functions that range from the social to the spiritual functions. Such functions as enunciated by Sargent are:

- Masquerades are a mechanism for social control and are effective in the elimination or control of aberrant or unacceptable behaviour
- Masquerades can be source of historical evidence ... and are a mechanism of social identification and a reflection of ethnic origins
- Masquerades can be a technique for establishing political legitimacy and are a mechanism whereby devotion and loyalty are generated within a diverse population.
- Masquerades are a culturally significant institution which defined relationships of the individual or clan to state lineage and family.
- Masquerades are symbolic representation of national, clan and lineage afflictions as well as the ancestors of a specific group or grouping and can also be owned by specific age-sets which cut across descent group relationships
- Masquerades are a representation of religious beliefs and the basic physical characterization of ancestor worship. (36)

In Igala culture incarnate beings perform several functions such as rites and rituals, settling cases that are beyond the intervention of the elders and kings, blessing a particular community or the entire Igala society, prophesying, dealing with witchcrafts, settling in cases of aberrations, and laying curses on some social misfits. It is also a source of entertainment. And, while the presence of incarnate beings brings joy and happiness to some group of persons in the society, it can also constitute a source of sadness and sorrow to others. Speaking on the functions of incarnate beings in Igala cosmology, Boston stresses that:

In Igala country, masquerades are used to dramatize the relationship that exists between the ancestor's world and the world of the living In Igala, masquerades appear at funeral ceremonies for the final rites of burial called *Aku*. They also appear at annual ancestor's festivals, *Okula* and *Egwu* (18).

In Igala culture, there are different types of incarnate beings such as *Ekwe* the royal incarnate being, *Egwuafia*, *Egwu-gbom-gbom*, *Abule*, *Ochonono*, *Obajadaka*, *Epe*, *Inyelekpe*, *Agbanabo*, *Ikekeku Ahuma*, *Jamadaka*, *Odumado*, *Ichawula*, *Ablifada*, *Akwubaliba*, etc. Some of these incarnate beings perform thaumaturgy, wonders and feats. The group of the incarnate beings that perform thaumaturgy, wonders and feats are feared, honoured and revered by the Igala society. There is a second level of incarnate beings

which function at the level of social control. Among such incarnate beings are; *Abule*, *Epe*, *Atawa ekeji*, etc. Any other incarnate beings are simply meant to entertain. *Akwubaliba* incarnate being belongs to the category of entertainment.

THE AKWUBALIBA (LOCUST) INCARNATE BEING

In Igala, incarnate beings appear at different occasions depending on the function of the occasion and the particular incarnate beings. Such occasions in question are: festivals, both royal and general, ritual performance, performance of rites, burial of male adult, social occasions such as coronation, political gathering, welcoming of a great man, etc.

In Igala, there are many festivals; some are royal such as *Inkpi*, *Ocho*, *Oganyiganyi*, *Egwu* and *Ogbadu*. Most festivals are celebrated at community, village and clan levels. The particular festival which involves the appearance of *Akwubaliba* incarnate being is the *Eka Uwo*. *Eka Uwo* is only celebrated by communities in Ibaji local government of Kogi State. Ibaji is a riverine area of Igalaland. The local government is made up of fifty two communities. It lies at the extreme south of the Igalaland. The local government is bounded in the north by Idah local government area, in the south by Anambra State, in the East by Enugu State and in the west by Edo State. The major festivals that feature in Ibaji are, *Abo Okocho*, that is the festival meant to honour farming implements particularly hoes after the yam cultivation, *Uchu erote*, this is a new yam festival. No fresh yam is eaten before this festival, *Eka oloji*, this festival comes up after all the harvests, and it is celebrated during the rainy season – indeed, a care-free season, then, *Eka uwo* which is celebrated at the heart of dry season or at the beginning of rainy season when cultivations are still going on.

Eka Uwo features many incarnate beings which include the *Akwubaliba*. The festival lasts for five days and *Akwubaliba* will only appear on the fifth day. *Akwubaliba* means locust in English. Locust usually appear in a large number, sometimes in millions, and whatever crop they descend upon will be consumed to the stalk. In the case of *Akwubaliba* as an incarnate being, they do not consume anything, but the metaphor is that these young incarnate beings whose ages are between ten to twelve appear in their hundreds. They do not beat with canes as they do not even carry canes. They do not belong to the thaumaturgic entity as they are simply out to entertain. They do not function as a social control as they do not come out to perform the duty of *Abule* the night incarnate being which satirizes the members of the society. Like *Obajadaka* and *Ablifada* incarnate beings, *Akwubaliba* can be classified as general incarnate being. According to Sargent:

The classification of general masquerades (incarnate beings) suggests that they are outside the central collection, and are not representative of any dynastic period of particular population ... they can be

described as commoner masked figures recognized by the entire Igala population, but with a specific historical background that identifies the masquerades with certain figures and groups in the corpus of the Igala formation (34).

The objective of *Akwubaliba* performance is to bring joy, peace, an love to mothers, fathers and the entire community. There is no intention of hurting any person or a group of persons. The development at the end of every outing of the *Akwubaliba* is as a result of human frivolity.

The outing of *Akwubaliba* incarnate beings starts with special preparation. The incarnate beings are expected to be out in the evening around 4pm. All other incarnate beings are ordered to leave the arena for their special abode in order to create enough space for the young incarnate beings also, so that the young incarnate beings should not be harassed or intimidated. This is in consonance with the Igala saying that; *Egwu kitu Egwule ki mu egwu je*, meaning, the greater incarnate beings have the capacity to devour the lesser ones. The issue is that the *Akwubaliba* are young incarnate beings, there is a tendency for them to take to their heels out of fear on sighting the bigger incarnate beings, forgetting that they are also incarnate beings.

In preparation for their outing, young boys and men with their canes will parade the length and breadth of the community with the following songs:

Akwubaliba, Ijomili, Ijomili Kocho Ijomili

Akwubaliba, Ijomili, Ijomili kocho Ijomili

Uchekibo ma de olupu ma diye

Uchekibo di be oko ma diye

Uchekibo ma do woli ma diye

Iye, Iye, Iye cho mi nwu mi mo

Iye, Iye, Iye du enwu nwu mi je

Ijomili, Ijomili Kocho Ijomili

Ene ki ma noma kina ghe ju mo mi

Ijomili, Ijomili Kocho ijomili

Translation

Ijomili is an onomatopoeic description of their sizes and population.

Some of them are calling their mothers in their compound

Some of them are calling their mothers in the backyard.

Mother, mother, give me water to drink

Mother, mother, give me food to eat

Whosoever is barren may be agonized

The fertile women who are able to beget children should rejoice.

After the singers have paraded the length and breadth of the community three to four times, there is a massive pouring out or an oodle of the young incarnate beings. It is usually a great spectacle to behold. The young incarnate beings in their hundreds will spread all over the community, running, jumping and dancing. The spectators are held in bewilderment. The women then will turn out in their great number with their cheering and jubilation. There is joy and jubilation all over the community. The young incarnate beings are made to form a single line formation and are made to parade the entire community as the young men and women continue with their songs.

After the parade, they are arranged into two line formation while they march to the community performance arena. In the arena, they move out in pairs to execute some dance steps. This will continue to the last *Akwubaliba*.

The singers which comprise the young men and women continue with their songs unabated while the dances are going on.

After the last two *Akwubaliba* have performed, they once again spread out as they run the length and the breadth of the community. In the process, the entire community is agog with jubilation and goodwill. The *Akwubaliba* will finally move back to their spiritual abode waiting till the next year.

THE IMPLICATIONS

The appearance of the young incarnate beings in their numbers emphasizes joy, happiness, jubilation and goodwill. The entire community is held spellbound with the spectacle created by the young *Akwubaliba*. Elders are seen pouring libation, reciting incantations and chanting for the ancestors to preserve the lives of the young ones. The larger the number of the incarnate beings, the greater happiness from the community as this may be an indication of population explosion among children. Definitely, it is the sucker that must replace the old banana tree when it is finally cut down. Some women are seen singing and dancing in supplication and fanfare while others are seen in pensive mood, perhaps in agony. For the next two to three weeks, the atmosphere continues to be cheering and cheerful. Children and youths are elated and proud.

To say that the entire community is elated at the outing of *Akwubaliba* is a hyperbolic statement. Some frivolous barren women in the community usually find the entire activity repulsive and repugnant. To them, nature has been unkind to them. The joy expressed by the larger community emphasizes the sorrow and sadness of these women. The expression of joy by some other women perhaps is an aberration to the existence of the barren women as they feel subjugated by nature.

After all these manifestations, the last options to this class of people are anger, hatred, malevolence, malice which tend to manifest in witchcraft and mischief. The anger from these frivolous women will first of all be exercised on their husbands, then to the immediate neighbours and to the community at large.

Where does the “bad blood” filter from? Part of the lyrics says that those barren women who are bitter about not being blessed with the fruit of the wombs should take solace from God. The other part says those who are blessed with children should rejoice and jubilate with all supplications. With the song, the minority barren women are reminded of their inability to give birth. The song seems to puncture the “bile” of the barren women as it seems they have been pronounced incongruous and inconsequential. Perhaps, the society never thought of the latent meaning of the song as the song is rendered by the inexperienced youths. The society may not contradict itself as there is an adage that, it is providence that shapes our ends, and that, it is God that gives children not through anybody’s personal effort.

If the lyrics should be removed from the body of the performances, should the barren women have accepted the *Akwubaliba* incarnate being performance with fanfare, pageantry and euphoria associated with the performance? Let’s see then the euphoria that welcomes the appearance of the *Akwubaliba* incarnate beings. As they fan out in their numbers, most women become ecstatic as they plunge their whole being into uncontrollable jubilation. They shout, sing, ululate, chant and dance and suddenly there are whispers among them as mothers tend to be identifying the incarnate beings how they walk, run and dance like their sons. The whispers are solely between women as it is sacrilegious for men to hear such blasphemy. It is at the process of identification that the barren women are also touched as they have no one to associate with any of the incarnate beings.

CONCLUSION

Africans are endowed with performances, which in most cases unite the people and create goodwill, sense of belonging, socialization process and unity. Performances in most cases unite both the mortal and the immortal as the mortal use the performances as supplication, thanksgiving, honour and acknowledgement to the supernatural powers and as a gesture, the supernatural powers supply the living with all their needs. But in some cases, performances with all their fanfare and jublations could become a paradox. In essence, while some people are engrossed with joy and goodwill, others may be laden with sorrow and anger. But the Igala believe that the unborn child in its spirit essence does not assume the womb of angry and wicked woman. The Igala believe that the essence of this life is to share and share alike. In essence one person’s burden is everybody’s burden and one person’s achievement is everybody’s achievement.

The manifest function of *Akwubaliba* performance is a moment of joy, happiness, jubilation and entertainment, paradoxically, the latent function carries sorrow and anger among some insignificant population of the community.

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