

Traditional Music, Cultural Values and Belief Systems in Nigeria: Interrogating the Place of Spirit Manifests in Oshimili Communities

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Abstract

This paper examines the roles of music in expressing and connecting with the spiritual realm in Oshimili Communities of Nigeria. These Communities have a rich cultural heritage intertwined with their belief systems and customs. Despite external influences and modernization trends, many Oshimili Communities strive to preserve their cultural values and belief systems. This paper relies on oral interviews and literature to trace the origin, performance practices, and structure of the indigenous music in Oshimili. Due to restrictions placed on non-initiate members, information on the spirit manifest among the communities under study is limited; hence oral interviews and literature reviews are relied upon as source of data. The relationship between music, cultural values, and belief systems in these communities demonstrate the profound spiritual connections that music can foster. It is important to investigate and understand the historical perspectives and significances of the spirit manifest among these indigenous communities in order to protect, preserve and promote the continuity of this unique cultural heritage. Three Communities in *Oshimili* are involved in the performance practices of the spirit manifest, and they are main the focus of this study. The communities are: Illah, Oko and Asaba communities. It is also important to investigate the roles of spirit manifests among Oshimili communities and point out their distinctive significant roles in maintaining, preserving and upholding the cultural norms and values of these communities. The study further brings out the current changes in the performance structures of spirit manifests in the communities under investigation.

Keywords: Traditional Music, Masquerades, Spirit-Manifest, Communities, Culture, *Egwugwu*.

Introduction

The traditional music of a community gives individuals a view to their ways of life and practices. Music, being an art has not only served as a means of entertainment but has brought a lot of highlights to the traditions and cultural practices of communities. It serves its purpose in almost all cultural aspects of communities; entertaining, informing, and communicating its messages to its various audiences. Thus, music may be for social as well as for religious occasions, entertaining its audiences and educating them for a better understanding of the community's cultural heritage.

Brook (2023) notes that, "from ancient civilizations to modern societies, masquerades have played a significant role in shaping cultural identities and spiritual beliefs". He stresses that "dating back to ancient times, masquerades were originally associated with religious rituals and ceremonies". During this time, it was common to find masquerades being led in the daytime to perform during important ceremonies such as burials, title taking and other types of ceremonies. Masquerades have therefore played significant roles in the cultural development of indigenous communities where they exist. This is achieved through projecting peace and handling conflicts of all kinds as well as enjoying the aspects of social and communal efforts through entertainment. This notwithstanding, there exists a dearth of scholarly enquiry on the roles played by masquerades in the area under study. This has further led to scant data on masquerades and spirit manifests in the locale.

Background Information and Some Issues Associated with Spirit Manifests in Oshimili Communities

Masquerades and spirit manifests among communities in Nigerian play various roles, depending on the tradition, their cultural dispositions and practices. Every community in Nigeria has their various masquerades that play their expected roles during special occasions like festivals (Igbi, 2016), just as they also have functions and rules guiding them. Among these communities, masquerades are used by the young and the old but restricted only to the male members of the community. Women and girls are not allowed to wear masks nor indulge in activities that require the presence or performance with masquerades whether during social gatherings or culture-centered activities. These restrictions are seriously administered in order to upload their cultural norms and values. These are most likely to have been handed to them from ancient community leaders and lawmakers who have kept the secrets of the masquerade cult intact for years. Every indigenous community in Nigeria society share almost the same related view on the concept of masquerades and the significance of the Mask. Deezia, (2024), states that "masquerades are ancestral spirits personified by maskers who appear in public at seasoned periods". He stressed that "they are manifestations from the spirit realm of the ancestors and other disembodied beings seeking communication with mortals".

The roles and functions played by masquerades depend on the cultural dispositions and settings of the communities involved. Socially, masquerades are very active during festive periods where communities entertain their audiences with masquerades that represent certain renowned persons. Some may have passed on long ago and these activities showcase their cultures and belief systems despite its entertainment aspect. More so, masquerades also represent the dead or ancestors who have played roles in defending the communities in various ways and through these, made very unforgettable impacts. These ancestors are therefore seen as gods/goddesses, hence are not to be forgotten but revered and even worshipped. Masquerades are seen from different perspectives and degrees and these have their very important roles. The masquerades called *mgbodu*, *nmanwu*, are viewed as mere mortals that are presented to the communities for entertainment and for

social-cultural activities. These are usually performed without restraint and for the entertainment view of all guests whether members of the communities or outsiders who are guests. These masquerades are organized by age grades and in other cases, music or dance groups who come together to form an entertainment group and make use of this means to portray their cultural packages and practices.

The spirit manifest is seen and conceived to be dead ancestors who may have been members of the family but have died and resurfaced as spirits in order to be with them and for the family to bid them farewell. The spirit manifest as it is believed has come to mourn through this means and to also give them instructions on certain issues he (the deceased) may have not given while alive. The spirit manifest is therefore revered by every community where it exists. The presence of the spirit manifest in a community is handled with caution and restriction because of the rules, restrictions and taboos that come with it. The cultural activities and even the music of the spirit manifest are never sung by those who are not its followers or outside its event. Penalties are paid by those who go against these laws. For serious offenses, sanctions are placed and people can be ostracized if the laws concerning the spirit manifest in regards to keeping its secret are not upheld. The belief here is that the *nmanwu* or *mgbodu* is seen as the masquerade that dwells among members of the community. Hence, they can mingle with everybody, food and money can be offered to them. However, the spirit manifest is a spirit and its presence is a communion between the living and the dead who have come to mourn; They also confer with the living especially family of the deceased, before going finally to join the ancestors where it is believed that all who die return.

Before the intrusion of Western culture and civilization which first came into Africa in form of Christian movement (Igbi, 2017) and culture as well as trade and Islamic integration in the Northern part, Africa communities believed in life after death and spirits. The spirits of their ancestors are therefore revered, hence they are influenced by these spirits which they depend on solely in regards to their living and belief in the super-natural. These beliefs and practices seem to guide their attitudes in spirituality. Communities therefore, believe that these spirit manifests are their ancestors who have come to confer with them and join in their mourning, after which they return to their place of rest where they go to be with other ancestors that have died. Their coming out to join the living at that point is to celebrate their culture and uphold their belief in reincarnation and life after death. These are usually apparent in their performance activities, structures and music. Music and dance are used as mediums of entertainment and information as well as communication for this occasion. The active participants are the immediate relatives of the deceased and those who are initiate members of the cult. They join in the singing, dancing and interpreting the language to its immediate families when messages are exchanged between the spirit manifest (*Egwugwu*) and the people. This activity portrays the communion between the living and the dead which is part of the cultural practices of the communities that is still in existence today. This action also heightens the belief in the supernatural powers which has been the practice of indigenous communities.

The roles of the spirit manifest seem to differ in the sense that the masquerade, though wears the mask of the ancestor that it represents and during entertainment tries to imitate its mannerisms and showcase its character, returns back to join its audience unmasked. The person wearing the mask can be seen if the group so desires. However, the spirit manifest is not human as specified by the communities where it emerged neither can it be seen. The spirit manifest is a spirit and returns back to its rest after performing its duty as prescribed by culture. In *Oshimili* communities, the spirit manifest cannot be recorded, nor pictures of it taken. For the others, the *nmanwu* or *mgbodu* as it is called can be recorded and pictures of it can be taken.

Method of Data Collection

Data collected for this study include primary and secondary sources where literature on spirit manifests were sort. Interviews were conducted and other sources were based on the experiences of the writers. The interviews were limited due to the secrecy that surrounds the participation and spiritualism involved in the activities of the *Egwugwu*. The writers found out that *Oshimili* communities have their ancestral cults (*ishi okwute*) which portray and represent the highest traditional cult that absorb only male members of the community. And these are selected according to their age grades hence every age grade has their limitations in the worship and performance. As they get older and through active participation, they get to the highest grade whereby they can confer face-to-face with the spirit manifest.

Masquerades in Oshimili Communities

Oshimili communities see masquerades as representatives of gods/goddesses that they worship and revere, hence masks are artistically carved to showcase the image of the intended ancestors. Furthermore, the masquerade is usually called by the name of the ancestors that it looks like. These ancestors may be fallen heroes/heroines, and warlords. They are individuals who may have contributed immensely to the development of the community and perhaps had died in service of the community. Masking is a very common practice among indigenous cultural communities and it portrays their beliefs and practices in supernatural powers and rituals. Chielotam, (2015) states that "masking is a quintessential part of traditional African life". She stressed that "masquerades, as traditions, are ritualized performances of those cultural truths that serve the holistic needs of the communities within which they occur". Molinta, (2014) explains that, "masquerades help shape and influence a people's social universe". Masquerades are therefore seen as mediators between the people and their gods/goddesses. They act and display the characters of the persons that they have idolized and that they represent in their communities. These masquerades are often called by the name of these persons. During their performances, these Masquerades also showcase the characters of the persons they represent.

Besides the aforementioned, masks are often worn by little children who are spontaneously imitating the practice seen amongst them. They often wear masks made with woods and /or torn materials as they go round the village playing musical instruments, singing, dancing and seeking monetary gifts. This reflects their interests in their culture and intention to practice and uphold these cultural heritages. This action further reflects the means in which good musicianship can be obtained and even identified. Before most masks are worn in some communities, rites are performed to ward off evil. Not everybody is permitted to wear masks for ceremonies that occur in most of these indigenous communities. Women are however prohibited from wearing masks and their involvement in masquerade activities is very silent even as audience. The reaction to both the celebration and organization of masquerade parade depends on how these communities practice their cultural beliefs and affiliations to masquerade in regards to rituals. The concept of masquerade can also be viewed from different perspectives, depending on how the communities see their cultural inclinations towards masquerade celebration and performances. It is noteworthy that some communities see masquerading as a social stratum that showcases cultural beliefs and practices. On other hand, some view it as a gift from the gods that upholds religious beliefs in the supernatural powers that protect, guide, defend and direct their cultural practices. Hence one can find masquerades appearing as a medium between the people and the gods it represents. Furthermore, the mask worn assumes the gods/goddesses being worshipped or honored and the name of such person or god is being given to the masquerader. Examples of these can also be found among Igbo communities. Some masquerades are called by the names of the communities where they emerged and also from the exact quarter in the community; a typical example is the *ngbodu ngbodu isieke* from the Isieke quarters of Asaba community in Delta State, Nigeria.

Akubor (2016) reports Akintola who portrays a fact about masquerades by stating that, "our folklore or read superstitious inclinations consider masquerades heavenly beings to be respected and revered, but they are never touched, their colorful garments sometimes identify a clan of masquerade pedigree renowned for having powers that instill irrational fear in onlookers". In Oshimili communities, the masquerades called *Nmanwu* or *Mgbodu* are revered and respected but are specially projected majorly for entertainment and social integration. During this, the community actively shares their common beliefs and interests in the cultural display presented by these masquerades during their socio-cultural performances which may either be organized or spontaneous. The roles masquerades play are socially inclined hence they are majorly seen as mediums for entertainment and pleasure. Masquerades perform outside their cultural areas if they are invited for social performances or even burial and other performances. The person wearing the mask is not seen but the masquerade is highly respected by members of the community. This is because of the roles they play in regards to the culture and norms as well as the values placed on these cultural practices. No matter how small or young any masquerade appears in a community, both the young and the old respect them in order to maintain the value to its personality in the community. These actions point out the effectiveness of social control,

cultural practices and awareness of the community's norms and values. It also highlights the cultural uniqueness of these communities; these types of masquerades are seen as spirits and not mere masquerades that come out merely to entertain the community. They are considered to be the spirit of their ancestors that have come to be with them. This has necessitated Meki Nzewi to coin the term "Spirit-Manifest".

Spirit Manifest in Oshimili Communities (Asaba, Illah and Oko)

It is necessary to differentiate between the spirit manifest from the masquerade although all are categorized under masquerade if the concept of the term 'masquerade' is taken into account. The spirit manifest has to do with the super natural being, the dead coming back to life and mingling among the living for a purpose before departing finally to join the ancestors for final rest. In his unpublished book, *Maduemezia*, notes this about the *Egwugwu* by stating that "this subject is sacred material in the traditional society (of Asaba community in particular). He further states "because with this ritual, the *Mmuo* (spirit essence) of the deceased is deemed to have resurrected from the grave or tomb". Like the '*Egungun*' of the Yoruba of western Nigeria, the *Egwugwu* of these communities in Oshimili shares the same characteristics and they are revered and followed by initiated cult members who protect the secrets of these spirit manifest. Nobody is allowed close to the *Egwugwu* except certain members who have been faithful in the cult. Among the *Oshimili* communities, the members of the cult are called the '*ishi okwuta*'. According to *Maduemezia* "it is presumed because the '*ishi okwuta*' can perceive issues from the transcended spiritual aspect; it can pass judgment even if only one party has presented its case and its decision is final".

Oshimili communities are made up of both the South and the North. These communities share very familiar cultural practices hence Oko and Asaba communities as well as Illah have the *Egwugwu* spirit manifest which are used for similar occasion. They all trace their origin to *Igala* where they claim their ancestors migrated from. It is also believed that the resurrected spirit of the deceased appears as his *Egwugwu* through the secret rituals of the *ishi okwuta* and the knowledge of this secret is seriously guarded with all seriousness in order to maintain the old cultural practices of the people which has been handed over to them by their ancestors. To become a member of the *Egwugwu* cult, the male member must be initiated and must swear to keep and protect the secrets that concern its operation and existence. The members must always expose their upper body and leave it bare whenever they are with the spirit manifest and when they meet with it. There is therefore the belief that the secret science of the ritual confers on the people, a life of immortality hence they believe that "they live, die and are buried, then resurrect as the *Egwugwu*. While the womenfolk live, die and are buried; their soul essence resurrects from the tomb. This notwithstanding, it remains in the subtle part of mother earth, while the souls of the men may ascend to another sphere of existence. This is called '*ubom iza*' which means the 'inner realm of pure spirit'. The spirit-manifest is called the *Egungun* among the Yoruba of Nigeria and among areas in Oshimili communities where it exists. The spirit – manifest of

both communities share or rather have the same features and attributes as well as characteristics. Among Oshimili communities, Asaba, Oko and Illah have the *Egwugwu* as their spirit-manifests which appears mainly to mourn during funeral ceremonies of the elderly or titled men. The spirit-manifest is believed to have come all the way from the other side of the world to perform certain duties which were left unfinished by the deceased. It is therefore believed that the deceased is one of the spirit-manifests present during the activity. He plays a distinctive role by calling names of his family members and giving messages and advices. In fact, conversations usually go on during this activity which is a very solemn period. At this point there is no restriction in regards to gender. This is because the female family members and those not initiated into the cult, as well as other family members are allowed to sit in the presence of the *Egwugwu* during this session. During burial ceremonies, the number of the spirit-manifest that come to mourn is determined by the level of affluence of the children. This may be because at the end of the ceremony, all the followers of the *Egwugwu* cult are entertained with assorted drinks. This marks the end of the burial.

Akintola reiterates that "reading some research materials, the masquerades known as 'Egungun' in Yoruba are considered people risen from the dead bones (skeleton) made alive, hence the assumption they are heavenly beings." The above assumptions further portray the fact that African communities generally believe in life after death. The same is seen of Asaba, Illah and Oko communities of Delta State Nigeria. They see the spirit-manifest (*Egwugwu*) as the spirit of the dead who has come back to life to confer finally with his family, give them series of messages and bid them farewell as it leaves to join his ancestors at the resting place called *Ubom izah*. There is music and dance to accompany this parting which is a solemn session that is also ritualistic in nature. Chants can only be done by the senior members of the cult who lead it into its final resting place called *Okwule*, before its last departure to join its ancestors at *ubom izah*. What happens inside is purely between the members of *ishi okwuta* and it is a secret sworn and kept among them. *Maduemezi* explains that the *ubom izah* is known as "the eternal paradise of inner spiritual realm". Maintaining the belief in life after death and reincarnation by these communities, *Maduemezia* concludes that, "on the shore is an equally white and extensive sand beach stretching unto the right and to the left in infinity. Each of what appears like a grain of sand is a human soul that has come to rest from its journey. Behind one, as one stands on this shore, are the seven forests, seven rivers and seven mountains that the soul has traversed to arrive at *Ubom Izah*".

This strengthens the belief in the supernatural powers and portrays the cultural practices which are attached to the celebrations of the lives of the ancestors who are believed to still have a communion and communication with the living. *Maduemezia* gives an analogy of this by stating that, "we may now try to classify the various realms in which the *nmuo* (human spirit) spends the periods of its existence as it journeys". Conclusively, he gives the following analysis:

Seven forests=realms of concrete material forms

Seven Rivers=realms of emotion

Seven Mountain=realms of the mind (here dwell the angelic beings

Ubom Izah= the inner realm of pure spirit.

Features of Masquerades and Spirit Manifest Music

The music of the masquerades is socially controlled and is popular among them. They are music that are sung in other activities hence everybody in the community that is conversant with the music sings and dances along with them. There are no restrictions placed in regards to the music performed by masquerades. For the music of the spirit manifest, their songs are usually in recitative form and the words are not understood except by the cult members who sing or chant them. The members claim that the songs are of the spirits hence cannot be understood. These songs are never sung by members outside the performance period nor can non-members sing them. The texts of the songs are meaningless to those who are non-members. The music, drumming and dances are done only by the initiate members of the *Egwugwu* cult since nobody is permitted to neither dance to their music nor sing their songs. The presence of the spirit manifest presents a meeting between the ancestors and the people, the living and the dead whereby communication also plays vital roles in upholding the cultural beliefs and practices of a particular group thereby re-enforcing their cultural disposition while advertising on areas that need to be shown to outsiders in order to maintain the uniqueness of the culture.

The songs by masquerades range from festival songs to work songs and other popular indigenous songs which are commonly used in the community for social activities. The songs therefore suit the occasion in which they are called to perform and these could be for festivals, burials, and other ceremonies that are socio-cultural. There may be special songs used for special and important occasions which may have been composed by the group for that special event. Musical instruments such as membrane drums, bells and woodblocks are used as accompaniment to the musical performances. There are some masquerades that rites are done before they can appear in public for performances. These are masquerades that are tied to certain cultural affiliations that may require rituals for their performances and presence in the community hence their publicity is preceded with rites which must be carried out as culture demands. The costumes worn by masquerades may depict the ancestors they represent or they have chosen as their model depending on the cultural activity or members of the group. It may also be shown in the colours chosen which may be dark or bright. These decisions concerning costumes are however culture-centered or based on group decisions and agreement. The masquerades are therefore viewed as human beings dressed in colorful attires, masked to entertain their guests whilst they portray the mannerisms and characters of whoever they are representing or who they uphold in their group as their patron.

The above view is not the same as that of the spirit manifest. The spirit manifest seen as a spirit is secretly seen and discussed as a spirit from the ancestors. Johnson (1970) notes that "*Egungun* tradition is described as the worship of the spirit or the souls of the ancestors. The

costumes are worn by "human beings" of the exact height and figure of the deceased, covered from head to foot with cloths similar to those in which the said deceased was known to have been buried completely masked and speaking with unnatural tone of voice". Traditionally, the observation made by Johnson is not publicly spoken nor acceptable by the communities where the spirit manifest exists. The secrecy is to maintain their cultural beliefs and guard it jealousy in order to maintain that cultural integrity and keep their ritual and religious activities from dying or being influenced. Oshimili communities are strictly prevented from discussing the spirit manifest openly and investigating into the secret of the cult is never successful because of the oath of secrecy taken by the members. It is believed that any member who leaks the secret is severely punished.

Gender Roles in Masquerade Performances

Gender is the state of either being a man or a woman. This state has further defined the duties, character, and behavior expected of these genders by their societies taking into account, their norms and value system. The cultural state of the society or community where one emerges, to an extent, guides their behavioral attitudes hence cultural values, practices are upheld to organize the activities of one community, maintain its integrity and keep its existence stable and unique so that it does not go into extinction. Thus, in some communities a particular sex can be debarred from performing certain musical and extra-musical functions (Igbi, 2018). The existence of masquerades and spirit manifests portray an ancient history of its community and its presence and activities still uphold their cultural value system which are highly needed to keep the community intact and in existence.

In the traditional practices of Oshimili communities and other Igbo communities of Nigeria, women are not allowed to be directly involved in the activities that are connected with masquerades and spirit manifests. It is believed that women have no serious roles in these activities because they are involved in other activities that will help their men to attain spiritual powers that energizes them to face every spiritual forces that may face them. Women therefore are exempted and barred from the spirit manifest and its activities. Secondly, the spirit manifest only comes out to mourn men who are initiate members and have attained to certain age. Finally, it is believed that women cannot keep the secrets of the spirit manifest and its ritual activities hence they are not allowed to be involved. There may be other reasons for these decisions which are gender stressed and these depend on the cultural practices and beliefs of the indigenous communities where the activities of the masquerades and spirit manifests exist.

While Asaba community does not allow women to be part of the *Egwugwu* spirit manifest, *Oko* community allows their women to follow and even sing along with them but their upper torso is left bare, no clothes covering the upper body as they join the procession of the *Egwugwu* spirit manifest. The age grades of the women are not stated but in *Oko* community, it is women who are of mature age that are allowed to join the procession during the *Egwugwu* festival.

Christianity's Influence on the Traditional Music of Oshimili Communities

The advent of Christian missionary activities in Nigeria in the mid nineteenth (19th) century had adverse effects on traditional music (Igbi, 2024). Introduced during the colonial period by European missionaries and reinforced through Western education, Christianity became a theological substitute to indigenous religious practices. This shift significantly affected the societal perception and performance of traditional music in Oshimili communities. One of the most palpable effects of Christianity was the religious reclassification of traditional music associated with masquerade performance and spirit manifests. These musical practices which were once central to Oshimili community life became often erroneously branded as "pagan," "idolatrous," or "heathen" practices by the early missionaries. Consequently, many families became discouraged and, in most cases, outrightly forbidden from participating actively or passively in traditional musical activities, especially those tied to ritual or masquerade performances. As expected, this led to a drastic decline in participation, predominantly among Christian converts. It further degenerated into a gradual loss of indigenous knowledge related to specific musical forms and instruments.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The paper examined the vital roles that music plays in sustaining and mediating cultural experiences in the Oshimili communities of Delta State, Nigeria, with special reference to Illah, Oko, and Asaba. The study demonstrated that traditional music is not only a performative art, but is a profoundly spiritual and cultural phenomenon that is firmly rooted in the cosmology and ritual life of Africans. Through oral interviews, the paper notes that regardless of restrictions on non-initiates and the guarded nature of spiritual practices, the music accompanying spirit manifests functions as a link between humans and spirit realms. As observed in these communities, the spirit manifests reveal the symbiotic relationship between music, ritual, and belief systems. However, it is noteworthy that contemporary influences like Christianity, modernization, and urban migration have resulted in shifts in the performance practices, participation, patronage, and public perception of these cultural heritages. The paper emphasizes that traditional music still holds its rightful place as a potent medium for upholding communal ideals, ancestral linkages, and spiritual consciousness in Oshimili and indeed other African societies. It is recommended that understanding and documenting these traditions is very vital for academic purposes and also essential for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

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