

HISTORICAL ORIGIN OF THE EBIRA CHAO MASKING AND MASQUERADE TRADITIONS

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Abstract

The arts and cultures of people are pointers to understanding who the people are. Hence, if not studied, it could lead to cultural stasis. The absence of literature on some cultures has led to misunderstanding about such traditions, and it is a reason why some people tend to have conflicting claims about some traditions. A case in point is the conflicting claims on the indigenes of Ebira Chao in terms of masking and masquerade traditions being alien or indigenous. This is because the current generation of the people, do not have any material to refer to for clarification and reconciliation of such conflicting claims. Based on this, some of the people who are Christian and Muslim faithful's advocate that the traditions be stopped from being practiced in the land, while some who are ardent believers in the cultures of the land are advocating for the sustainability of such traditions. It is for this purpose that, this paper intends to study the historical origin of the Ebira Chao masking and masquerade traditions by tracing the etymology of Idowo, Irepa and Ekuechi related masking and masquerade and the Ebira Chao concept of ancestral worship as it relates to the traditions.

Key Words: Ebira Chao, Ancestral Worship, Idowo, Irepa and Ekuechi, Cultures

Background of the Study

Culture, the total way of life of a people, is either material or non-material. It is most times, seen as a means of identifying people. The material culture of a people can manifest in the form of festivals, clothing, architecture, art and food, while the non-material culture includes the belief, language and philosophy of the people. Nigeria as a nation is made up of people, societies and civilization of different and unique cultures. Through some of their cultural practices, some societal needs are met. Hence, Bayo (2010) asserts that, some of the traditional Nigerian arts, in three dimensional form, are utilized in different areas, like social, sacred and secular purposes. For instance, masks, and utilitarian objects which may be anthropomorphic representations of gods, are produced and used to meet socio-cultural needs of communities, amongst other purposes.

The survival of cultural practices over some centuries, have become traditions that were sustained by the people, by handing down statements, beliefs, rules, customs or the likes, by word of mouth and practice from generation to generation. One of such traditions is the masking tradition that is practiced in most villages and towns in Africa, for some specific purposes, which vary from one society to another. In traditional African society, masking is the act of using a mask to cover or disguise the face. In addition to that, Lomel (1970) asserts that, masquerade is more than mere disguise, for it gives expression to the bond between a group of people and their ancestors, and that, it is an embodiment of a tradition and a guarantee of the continuity of an order hallowed by tradition.

In some communities in Africa, masks are worn by individuals that are chosen by the ancestors through divination before there can be spiritual manifestation of the ancestral powers to meet societal needs. To corroborate this statement, Willett (1971) discloses that, *chiwara* mask with its graceful curves of a hyena, produced by the Bambara of Mali was used for land fertility and to boost agricultural produce. Such mask with basket helmet was usually worn by the youth during agrarian festivals. In line with Willett (1971), Bayo (2010) asserts that, *kponiugo* mask of the Senufo which is characterized by a mouth like that of a warthog and the horn of a honey

comb are used to prevent soul stealers from operating in the community. In other words, it serves as a guardian spirit. The author further states that, *Dea* mask attached to grasses is of the Baga, and was used to protect the souls of the dead. Among the Yoruba, the *gelede* masquerade pays tribute to the special powers of women known as “the mothers”. Mothers are believed to possess a spiritual life force *ase*, which is equal to that of the deity *Orisa* (Drewal, 1974). *Ase* itself is a neutral force, neither negative nor positive.

On this note, the mothers can use their special powers for both negative and positive purposes. The negative purpose of the mothers is expressed with the term *aje*, meaning witch. The destructive mothers are most often thought to be involved in matters of infertility, impotence and the death of children, because they are constantly angry, easily irritated and jealous of those who are too happy. Bayo (2010) further narrates that mothers, in their positive aspect, are regarded as calm, creative and protective progenitors.

Similarly, among the Igbo, Aniakor (1979) describes the Igbo *Ijele* masquerade as an “elephant, the beautiful and expensive masquerade”, the biggest masquerade in Igbo land, and as a leading spirit (*mwuo*). The fact is that, the size of *Ijele* masquerade is outstanding when compared with other available masquerades throughout Igbo land. This highly placed *Ijele* masquerade comes out for display during *ofala* festival, which takes place once in every seven years. It may be noted that, the *Ijele* masquerade is one of the masquerades with a very large mask, therefore, constituting the key element in its masquerading tradition, hence, the interest of this study in masking tradition.

The Ebira are noted for their rich cultures and traditions in Nigeria. The Ebira occupy a land mass of about 150km around the confluence of the rivers Niger and Benue, in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. According to Ozigi (2004), historically, Ebira speaking people belong to the Kwaraafa or Apa group of people, of the middle belt region in Nigeria. They are specifically found in Kogi, Nassarawa and Edo states, and in the Federal Capital Territory (Saliu, 2010). Muhammad (2005) and Saliu (2010) assert that, there are Ebira Nya in Koton Karfi in Kogi state, Toto and Umaisha in Nassarawa state, Abaji in Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria, Ebira Tao in Okene, Kogi State and Ebira Chao in Igarra (Etuno), Edo state. The communities referred to as the Ebira, are bounded together as one, because of their cultural affinity and dialectical relationship. Each of these groups, speak similar dialect of the language, though, they occupy different locations as a result of state creation and boundary adjustments, in the Nigerian political map. One other reason about their dispersed settlements is their migration activities. The Ebira settlements are scattered over the numerous hills and mountains, which dominate the landscape of the region, and most of the earliest village settlements were located on the hill-tops, which are in some cases, rocky and serve as a defense against enemies (Muhammad, 2005 and Salami, 2011). They are hardworking farmers who craved for more fertile lands for their farming operations. Succession disputes, oppression, famine and epidemics are some other reasons for their series of migration.

The Ebira Chao

The Ebira Chao is an extraction of the Ebira ethnic group in Akoko –Edo local government area of Edo State, Nigeria. They hailed from the Jukun in the Kwaraafa kingdom, and migrated to Idah. When they sojourned at Idah, under Igala hegemony, they were neither Igala nor speaking Igala dialect. On migration from Idah with the Ebira Tao, they settled at Opete before proceeding to their present location called Etuno (Igarra), in Akoko-Edo Local Government Area of Edo, South-South Geo-Political Zone, Nigeria. They live in an organized society with a well-structured clannish traditional administrative system that was instituted by the great grandchildren of their ancestors. The clans include: *Anonyete (Ezi Igu)*, *Eshimozoko*, *Eziobe*, *Anona*, *Eshinavaka*, *Eshinogu (Eziogu)*, *Eshinagada*, *Andiba*, *Andede* and *Anosere* (Muhammad, 2005). The clans are also made up of sub-groups known as *opopo*. According to Ozigi (2004), a clan can be described as a group of people or families, descending from a common ancestor who is closely or remotely related by blood. Clans are important in the socio-cultural and political life of the people. Clan consideration was the basis of authority and social relations in Ebira Chao traditional community. It also plays an important part, in choice of leadership, appointment into certain positions, land acquisition, contracting of marriages, to mention but a few. Each clan has her own system or rules of selecting or choosing her leader, priest or chief. The method usually

employed was that of gerontocracy (leadership by elders). For the purpose of central leadership, *Oshinoyi* (paramount ruler) was appointed to oversee the general affairs of the society though there have been some contentions on who should be the supreme ruler and who should not be among the present day Ebira Chao.

The Ebira have their unique way of life. According to Salami (2011), every society of the world has certain characteristics which distinguish it from others. Cultures may be similar, but are never quite the same. Prominent among the traditions of the Ebira Chao is that of inheritance. Like in most other societies, inheritance is paternal. Male children inherit what their deceased father has left behind. In the past, the custom levirate involving the inheritance of wives (*oki ku oza ogu*) by sons and brothers of the deceased person (man) was widely practiced. However, the female children were not given much consideration, as they were regarded as outsiders, because they were going to be married into other families (Muhammad, 2005 and Salami, 2011). This practice is becoming less popular among the people today.

Traditional work-free day, which is observed once in a year, is observed by all. On such a day, no individual (indigene) is permitted to handle any working implement like; hoe and cutlass as a mark of honour to ancestors. Different arts practiced by the people are decorative arts, because of their quest for aesthetics. Some typical examples of their decorative arts include: cloth weaving, body, wall, pottery and mat decorations and wood carving (Saliu, 2010). The body decoration created with *uru* and *ukokori* are artistically made, especially during any of the cultural festival. Some of the cultural festivals of the Ebira Chao include; *Azi*, *Echetete*, *Irepa*, *Ubete* and *Ekuechi*. The celebrations of some of these festivals, for instance, *Ekuechi* and *Irepa* are characterized by masking and masquerades outing and display according to cultural dictates. It is important to note, that, masking and masquerades traditions are forms of ancestral worship. The people believe that, it is the spirit of the ancestors which transmigrate into any person wearing the *eku* (masquerade) costume and guide his actions (Ibrahim, 1976).

The Ebira Chao Concept of Ancestral Worship

Masking and masquerade traditions of the Ebira Chao revolve round their beliefs in a supreme being. The supreme-being is linked with the sky, and is called *Adayi ebeba* or *Oshiomoshi* (God). It is believed that, *adayi ebeba* has many attributes which are shown in the praises and eulogy showered on him. For instance, "*ogederisha, ogodogodo anuvo zo metu, ojioza tu and ofu reku*". These are translated to mean God, whose abode is in heaven, he is the one that no person's hand can reach at, the deliverer and the one that gives victory. God is seen as the creator of all things. To the Ebira Chao, next to God is the earth (*ete*). *Oshiomoshi* is the father, while *ete* is the mother. This does not; however, suggest that they are husband and wife. The earth is simply mother of all, owner of bounty, the great one who makes great heaps, who feeds one, then, forces him to vomit it. The last attribute of the earth is that; it fattens man for her own consumption. The land fattens man by yielding crops to feed him. In the end, man dies and his remains are "eaten" by the earth.

Next in the eternal hierarchy, is *ori* (oracles and deities) followed by ancestral spirits of different clans. *Ori* is the third in the Trilogy. Some examples of *ori* are the *idakoriko*, *ori abasu* *ori vokoto ori nyama*, *ori baru*, *ori okute* and *ori osawu*. Presentation of kola, sacrifices and incantations are rendered in this order of trilogy: *oshiomoshi*, *ete* and *ori*. Ancestral worship therefore dominated the traditional religion of the Ebira Chao on arrival at their present location (Igarra). Some ancestral temples or shrines were established to serve as point of contact between people and their ancestors. Families built temples through which protection is sought such as, the *inyama* owned by the *Anonyete* (*Ezigu* family) and the *Okute* owned by the *Eshimozoko* family. At such temples, were periodic sacrifices offered, and libation poured to appease them, assuage the fear of evil or to wade off evil. In the same strength, the *Ekue* (masquerade) cult played very significant roles in the Ebira Chao traditional worship. They believe that, it is the ancestors that rose and returned to earth in the form of masquerades to commune with the living, offer advices, pass judgements and even enforce laws.

Origin of the Ebira Chao Masking and Masquerade Traditions

The Ebira Chao has rich festivals that embrace masking and masquerade traditions. Hence, the "Historical Survey of the Ebira Chao Masking and Masquerade Traditions" is done based on the uniqueness of the masks and masquerades and their origin. It is on the basis of this, that, the

historical origins of the traditions are explained under three different sources as follows: *Idowo* Masking and Masquerade's History, *Irepa* Related Masking and Masquerade's History and *Ekuechi* Masking and Masquerade's History.

Idowo Masking and Masquerade

The *Idowo* masking and masquerade's history is traced back to early 18th century A.D. with *Osawo* as the deity. As a member of the *Eziobe* family of the Ebira Chao, who is disclosed to be a famous hunter who migrated along with the people from the Jukun, Kwararafa kingdom to its present location in Igarra, Akoko-Edo Local Government Area of Edo State, South-South, Nigeria. It was at his death that, the family saw him as a hero whose spirit should be revered and consulted for solutions to life challenges ranging from ill-health, success to protection of the people. Hence, *Idowo Osawu* became a deity manifested in the form of a masquerade each time he was to visit his people from a shrine that was built at *okovoza*. The appearing and re-appearing of the masquerade became a tradition that is upheld by the following families that make up the *Eziobe* clan: *Eziakozi*, *Eziodu*, *Ezioga Eziakuta* and *Anoverewa*. It is an established fact that, *Idowo* masking and masquerade tradition is of the Ebira Chao Origin.

Irepa Related Masking and Masquerade

Irepa related masking and masquerade tradition was derived from the age grade system. Connected to this, is *Aba* drum which is a relic of the *Kwararafa* in Jukun Kingdom, which was brought and introduced to the Ebira Chao, Igarra, Akoko-Edo Local Government Area of Edo state by a brave warrior and a hunter called *Akpogumoza* of the *Eziakuta Opoporiku* extraction of the *Eziobe* clan. The evidence of *Akpogumoza's* foot-print is on *iretoji* (black stone) that is located at the rocky side of the *Akovoza* axis. History has it that, the indigenes of the Ebira Chao introduced masking and masquerade traditions into the *Irepa* festival as a result of the political and social significance of the festival, as it relates to age group stratifications in the town. Thus, *Ishebe* masquerade was introduced as a means of creating the presence of the ancestors to herald *Irepa* celebration. By this, it is believed that, the ancestors were involved in the said festival which started in about 1789 A.D. During the festival, songs of victory of the Kwararafa kingdom are chanted. The festival is celebrated every seven years for the up-grading of the *opoze* age group to the *azebani* age group, which is the highest age group of the Ebira Chao. The *Irepa* celebration follows *upe enu* (new yam festival) of the year it is celebrated. During this celebration, masquerades whose costumes are made from banana plant leaves, strips of tree barks (*ochi avovoshi*) and jute threads are featured to entertain spectators. Therefore, the *Irepa* related masking and masquerade traditions which started in the 18th century A.D can be said to be of the Ebira Chao origin.

Ekuechi Masking and Masquerade

The history of *Ekuechi* and *Echeane* masking and masquerade has been traced to be of the Ebira Tao origin as narrated, thus oral source reveals that, the *eku* (masquerade) cult originated from Okehi (*Ohuoda*). It is further narrated that, *Ododo* of Okehi and *Obaji* of Eika were blood brothers with *Obaji* as the elder brother. When *Obaji* fell sick and it was apparent that, he was going to die, *Ododo* felt that it was not proper for *Obaji* to be older than him in this world and also in the spirit world. Oral history has it that, *Ododo* immediately went to see his sick brother, and with experience, he discovered that he would soon die. He felt cheated and bitter that *Obaji* whom he has served well for many years would be his senior in this world and in the spirit world, though, it is customary for the younger one to serve his elder brother. Hence, *Ododo* was at the command and service of his elder brother (*Obaji*) even at his adulthood. On *Ododo's* return from his brother, he felt bad because he wanted *Obaji* to serve him in return when they are transited to the world beyond. Consequent upon this, he told his children that, he was going to die and he instructed them to quickly bring up his image in the form of a masquerade. In other words, *Ododo* reincarnated as a spirit and assumed the physical form of a masquerade.

He told his children to embody him in the masquerade form if he died, and that, he would be *Obaji's* senior in the hereafter and in masquerade matters. *Ododo* also threatened to curse his children if they failed to carry out his instruction when he is dead. He also made provision for the masquerade costume that the children should wear on him. Before he finally died, he instructed that, no woman should be allowed to come near the masquerade, and that, he would be visiting them annually. When *Ododo* died, *Obaji* quickly understood the trick of his younger

brother and he instructed that, *Ododo's* death should not be announced. This was an attempt for him to die, so that, his death would be announced before people will get to know that *Ododo* was dead. However, *Ododo's* children refused *Obaji's* instruction, and announced their father's death all over *Okehi* that same night. There was beating of *anuva* and dance throughout the night, and was followed with *ogugu* dance which featured *Ekuechi* (masquerade) as a means of honouring *Ododo*. This is how *Ekuechi* and *Obaji* came into existence.

Ekuechi festival that embraces masking and masquerading was initiated as an annual festival to commemorate the great works of *Ododo* and *Obaji*. Since *Ekuechi* is an all-male affair, *unehe* which comes up in the eve of *Ekuechi* is designed to accommodate and satisfy the cultural thirst of the womenfolk. In the night, of this *unehe* day, men and women come out in their colourful attire to watch the traditional *ikede* singers who mount the rostrum at different locations of the town to pour out melodious songs accompanied with beating of drums and dance. *Ekuechi* festival comes up between the months of December and January every year, and it is celebrated in the sequential order starting from *Okehi (Ohuodo)* and followed by *Eika, Adavi, Okengwe* (including *Okene* and *Ihima*) and *Eganyi* in that order. It is pertinent to mention here that, when *Okehi* celebrates her *Ekuechi*, every other community in Ebira land (Ebira Tao and Ebira Chao) join in the celebration. This is a mark of honour given only to *Okehi* as the originator of the *Ekuechi* cult.

Oral source has it that, the practice of this rich tradition was introduced to the Ebira Chao by *Okoro, Aboki, Omonowo* and *Ichau* the custodians of the *Adagiri* masquerade who were visitors to the *Eziakuta* Opoporiku extraction of the *Eziobe* clan of the Ebira Chao in Akoko-Edo Local Government area of Edo State in 1927. An adage which states that, "*avi ze ku inu kuo, do varu ukuo*," this translates to mean that, "when a leaf consistently remains in soapy water, it will turn into a soap". Hence, as *Okoro, Aboki, and Ichau* lived with the Ebira Chao and practiced the *Ekuechi* cult, some of the Ebira Chao bought into it and were enlisted. Today, *Ekuechi* and *Echeane* festivals that embrace *Ekuechi* cult have become part of the traditions of the Ebira Chao. The masking and masquerade traditions related to *Ekuechi* and *Echeane* can be concluded to have originated from the Ebira Tao. This is also evident in the *ogugu* dance that features masquerades during final burial ceremony of a deceased adult among the Ebira Chao.

Conclusion

The Ebira chao are characterized by rich artistic traditions and are said to have a well-defined administrative system through which the people are governed. Out of all the cultures of the people, there has been conflicting statements about the historical origin of the masking and masquerades traditions. Consequent upon such claims, this study has resolved them by documenting the historical origin of the different masking and masquerades traditions that exist among the Ebira Chao in print by looking at *Idowo, Irepa* and *Ekuechi* related masking and masquerades history sequentially. Thus, information needed about the origin of the traditions can now be at the disposal of the people, and the practice of generalizing that, the Ebira Chao masking and masquerades traditions are alien to the people or not, is now a thing of the past.

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