

# Chanting The Wonder Masquerade: Projecting Secrecy; Magic And Medicine In African Traditional Religion Among The Nzam People Of Igbo Origin

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*Abstract: Igbo art is well known to the readers of African Arts and the corpus of scholarship on this subject is expanding drastically. Recent studies tend to be particularistic, focusing on forms associated with specific cult or ritual contexts. This paper examines an alternate and complementary method, analyzing the significance of a masquerade and its motif often discussed orally and totally unexplored. I will refer to this very masquerade and its motif broadly as “chanting the ‘wonder masquerade’: projecting secrecy; magic and medicine in African Traditional Religion among the Nzam people of Igbo origin”. The projection must be attached to the head of the wonder masquerade or the top of construction before it can be ritually contained and managed. The motif appears in the cloth masquerade costumes. Despite fantastic variation in form and shades of meanings, these projections share a fundamental principle of Nzam—Igbo religious thought.*

*Keywords: Concealment, Evoke, Imbue, Potency, Symbolism, Secrecy.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Not minding the contestations and historical paradigm of the origin of the wonder masquerade in Igbo land, it has been widely noted in African art literature for its magical and mystifying role through the mediation of its ensembles. No literature I have found has discussed the wonder masquerade as a traditional and magical masquerade or elements of an ensemble. Elaborate masquerade designs and complex compositional ritual functions of the masquerade are much encountered in the ritual dance culture of the Nzam people of Igbo origin of South-eastern Nigeria. This paper explores a unique type of masquerade known as wonder masquerade with mystifying ritual dance in a chanting in the *Omambala* river basin of the Igbo—its compositional features and specialized indigenous style of tailoring. Oral tradition have it that the wonder masquerade style in which it figures originated in Nzam – “a farming/fishing Igbo community on *Omambala* River basin of South-Eastern Nigeria” (Nzewi, 2000:25).

Originally, there are only three basic functions of masquerade in Nzam paradigm which are to unite the people with the living dead, to create peace and entertain the people. Nonetheless, in terms of wonder masquerade, it was formed in Nzam cosmology by a group of age grade as secret society so as to solve the afflictions of men and as well as to entertain. No wonder Chidester (1996:17) comments that the beliefs and practices of indigenous people like the Nzam community of Igbo origin “were found to be derived from ancient sources, most often from the religion of ancient Israel as it was familiar to Christian comparativists from their reading of the Old Testament”. Reflecting on the significance of drumming and rhythmic song, dancing, and other designated symbolic functions, the drumming of the wonder masquerade is considered to be the voice or influence of ancestral shades or other spirits that possesses the sufferer and give the cure (Janzen, 1994). Janzen further argues that it is in this form that ritual sound and dancing like that of the wonder masquerade drum of affliction “showed their inner workings and social contexts, their intricate ritual symbolism, therapeutic

motivations, and societal support systems” (Janzen, 1994:162). Reasserting on this position, Crump (2006:64) concurs that the chanting and the sound emanating from the drum beats of the wonder masquerade is “the personification of perfect compassion or the one who hears their cries”. Such drums has also been described as the “drums of affliction” (Turner, 1968:15) – reflecting the significance of drumming and rhythmic song – dancing, and the designation of the whole gamut of expressive dimensions by the term the wonder masquerade drum.

However, the name of the masquerade emanated from the special mystical dance display that it exhibits and this is the reason why in Nigeria content this kind of mystical display from the wonder masquerade is seen or belief to be the hand work and the ritual manipulation of an ‘African *Juju*’ because it is believed that this is where African magic and medicine are at interplay in practicality. Despite being a largely nautical people who regularly traveled downriver to trade (Borgatti, 2003), Nzam people are basically farmers. They are basically traditional worshippers irrespective of the fact that the people have seen a little beat of civilization, although the people still live the savage life in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. Their traditional way of life was so good and satisfactory that in recent times they have often been reluctant to abandon the land and move into the modern sector of the Nigerian economy (Idigo, 1955:2), although, Nzam people are part of the larger Igbo group till date. It is very important to mention here that Nzam is a unique Igbo community in the sense that she is a bilingual community. Every Nzam man apart from the fact that he speaks Igbo as his mother tongue equally speaks Igala the language of the ethnic Igalas bordering Igbo land in the north. This is why Nnamah (2002:9) asserts that it is very vital to mention here that Nzam is “strategically located at the point of origin of Igbo land from where Igbo land spread further into the hinterland”. He argues that the significance is that Nzam as a town represents “the boundary of Igbo land from where Igbo land stretched eastwards to the rest of its heartland”. (Nnamah, 2002:9). It would be said here therefore that Nzam people and the Igalas have deep cultural and ritual connections.

According to David Chidester (1996) the supposed discovery of such indigenous masquerade was based on the practice of morphological comparison that established analogies between the strange and the familiar. He argues that morphology did not depend upon reconstructing historical links between ancient and contemporary religions; rather, morphological comparison relied exclusively on the observation of formal or functional resemblance (Chidester, 1996:18). It is on this position that Akama (1985:25) asserts that the emergence of the wonder masquerade cult has transformed to the “belief in witchcraft and practices of other allied antisocial evils” in community like the Nzam and its environs. This is to counter the claims that “the gospel in Igbo land achieved an amazing success where the walls of pagandom collapse Jericho-wise” (Ayandele, 1973:126).

No wonder Umar Danfulani (1999:167) affirms that “African communities used various methods for controlling witchcraft before the introduction of colonial rule”. Similarly, Kathleen Wicker (2000:198) asserts that “these characteristics differentiate African spiritual traditions from Western religions, where faith usually involves acceptance of an

articulated set of beliefs posited as absolute truths”. But not withstanding the controversies on the origin, one thing that is clear is the fact that the ritual activities of the wonder masquerade cult movement is filled with ritual dance and songs that subdues the physical bodies of the devotees, while the spirit possession comes to the fore, in which a state of altered consciousness is attained and worship will be better effected. Michael Nabofa (2005:358) asserts that “these songs have been claimed to have been revealed to any of the members in dreams and in visions. They are not codified but learnt by memory because most members are illiterates”. He argues that “the ability to be able to master these songs indicates how mature the person is, spiritually and also how involved the person is in the religion. Although, these songs are not written they are well punctuated and they blend with the musical instrument” (Nabofa, 2005:358).

From the analysis of the above assertion, it has come to show that the historical paradigm of how the dance came into being which has been part and parcel of the Nzam oral tradition that is somehow neglected. No wonder Jacob Olupona (1991) has observed that the failure to engage in a history of African religions has created the impression that the religion is static and unchanging and that in the history of religions, diachronic analysis can no longer be neglected. Such analysis normally leads to issues of continuity and change in African traditional religion (Olupona, 1991:3). Chidester draws our attention to the idea that “such oral tradition as a myth is not a story with canonical closure, but rather than being subject to timeless repetition, such a myth is opened and reopened by interpretation, and as a result, such myth is a type of ongoing cultural work” (1996:261). Anthony Aveni asserts that by this way “history is regarded as a chain of events, a process whereby every happening contributed to the causation of future events” (1998:315).

## II. RITUAL ACTIVATION OF THE WONDER MASQUERADE AND ITS COSTUMES

After the tailoring, costumes and decoration of the wonder masquerade, the event signals that the final departure has arrived. Preparation such as different sacrifices, oaths and petitions are made in order to appease the gods to imbue it with mystical power that can cause eerie feelings to the onlookers. This is why DeVale (1989:98) affirms that the wonder masquerade belonging to the Nzam people comes out only on official occasions like the *Ovala* festival to ritually purify the village or otherwise safeguard it from possible misfortune and harm and it is equally essential to the efficacy of other seen and unseen problems which may be performed ritually in such as rites of passage. It is during this period according to Nzewi (1979:170) that “the incumbent principal religious officiant and his assistants set about procuring objects for the sacred rituals or ceremonies of the festival. It may be necessary to repair, renovate or rebuild the shrine house or temple or to prepare the shrine or temple grounds”. The ritual activation of wonder masquerade gives total abstract visual representation to significant moments in Nzam community during such significant festival and cultural history, while basically articulating esteemed values,

nourishing and maintaining the Nzam identity. In this case, Kalu Ogbu (2000:69) comments that during this period, “those who will escort the spirits are chosen and begin to arm themselves with empowering charms”. He further asserts that they do this in order that “the secrets of the cult as well as the gory rituals are shrouded from certain sectors of the populace”. The mystery remains that no one apart from the initiates knows the secrets, magic and ritual medicine behind the makeup of the structural costumes of the wonder masquerade. Nadel (1954:198) comments that “the costume is regarded as sacred, with a spirit that must be invoked”.

According to Perani & Wolf (1999:42) “the masquerade is constructed with a bamboo frame that supports a long tube of white, fringed, strip-woven cloth that allows the encased dancer to elongate and collapse the tube with a stick, causing it to sway back and forth like an otherworldly apparition”. They went on to say that it “can see and move simultaneously in all directions while growing in height to around fifteen feet before suddenly collapsing” (Perani & Wolf, 1999:42). The wonder masquerade appears to “grow from the ground and is swallowed by the ground” (Nadel, 1954:198). Belonging to a tall ghost masquerade genre, Kasfir (1985) comments that they are made with elongating mechanisms to manipulate the height of the costume.

This is why Gilbert (1987) affirms that “their outer form is publicly visible but their inner content remains veiled just as the sacredness of the king is concealed—though visually represented – within the king’s person”. Equally significant is the fact that “one of the principal causes of its survival is its use of secrecy as an essential if variegated, is that element of its methodology” (Abimbola & Hallen, 1993:217). No wonder Beidelman (1993) argues that secrecy is central to all human affairs, and that the paradoxes and ambiguities of concealment and revelation infuse most every form of human behaviour—from the way we dress to the way we speak, from the formal modes of etiquette to most routine of daily encounters. Secrecy begins with the individual. According to Roger Blench (2009:1) those who are wedded to European notions of religious objects, in particular regular time signatures, and the key system, find this indigenous object hard to interpret and “it is thus often ignored in scholarly accounts and other types of anthropological description”.

Buttressing this further, Adegbite (1991:45) posits that such sacred masquerade to the traditional African peoples may be described as “the vehicle for articulating an abstract idea in concrete form – for communicating thought as matter”. He argues that on the one hand, wonder masquerade as an aspect of sacred in Igbo cosmology, is regarded in traditional African societies as the most immediate expression of Eros; a bridge between ideas and phenomena (Adegbite, 1991:45). Polak (2006:163) argues that sacred wonder masquerade through the mediation of its ritual “has become an integral part of a supra-ethnic, local culture” of the Igbo tradition which “owe a great deal to the African religious heritage” (Behague, 2006:97). The style and its presentation in any socio-religious gathering in Igbo land is quite unique due to its “clarity of thought and communication”, and its “original instructions” (Jocks, 2004:141&142).

Commenting on this, Sophie Arquette (2004:160) asserts that during the ritual activation of the wonder masquerade

with the native white chalk called ‘*Afu*’ or ‘*Nzu*’ and the gin each pronunciation “is imbued with its own lexical code: sound as sign, symbol, index, as ostensibly defining a personal territory”. During this ritual activation, the chief priest drops the kola-nut and pours the drink on the head of the masquerade. Magically, the masquerade will shake its head consecutively for three times and this shaking of head symbolizes that it has accepted the offerings given or offered to it through spirit incantation in order to placate the spiritual forces guiding it. Writing in the context of ritual manipulation of *Orixá* in Candomblé Brasil, Ngokwey (1984:50) echoes that the ritual manipulation of the head serves not only to fix the *Orixá* in the head but also to “seal the asymmetrical relationship between the novice and initiator, a relationship patterned after the parental/filial model characterized by authority and dominance of the parent and the submission and dependence of the children”. Ngokwey further asserts that “this same asymmetry indicated by the coercive power of the *Orixá*” (Ngokwey, 1984:51).

In fact, the style of ritual presentation of the wonder masquerade before its outing actually represents a tradition of its own because it is “a prayer, recognition, a mark of solidarity and a symbol of unity amongst our people” (Ojukwu, 2002: v). Ballard (2006:1) affirms that “oneness, community, unity, and harmony are the very heartbeat” of every Nzam person in the presentation of the wonder masquerade. Presentation of the wonder masquerade as a sacred masquerade actually demonstrates and dramatizes the totality of culture, tradition and hegemony in Nzam community which marks complete Igbo identity – a remote indigenous village that has lived together as one people, in peace and harmony under different kingships, even before the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Nnamah, 2002:7).

In fact, illustrating “the pomp and pageantry” (Adegbite, 1988:15) that surrounded the drum beats and magical display of the wonder masquerade of the Nzam people demonstrates that notion of nobility and hegemony which has an Igala artistic torch. During such display, the entire community surges out in their finery. It is revelry galore (Ogbu, 2000:69). For Ojukwu (2002: v), the symbolism of the outing wonder masquerade for the Igbo people it “symbolizes our comings in, and our goings out, our joy and our sadness. It symbolizes our positions in the society and our achievements and our failures”. He argues that it “remains as a door through which our individual Igboness passes in to an assemblage of Igbo community” (Ojukwu, 2002: v). The Nzam repertoire and style of presenting the masquerade represents a tradition of its own because “it is a new development that actually builds on, fuses and recreates different sources” (Polak, 2006:163), which constitutes what Ayu (1986:9) refers to as profound “epistemology”. Ayu (1986:8) again posits that the wonder masquerade of the Nzam people have become an important genre. He argues that it is on this genre of popular tradition that a whole critical edifice was erected (Ayu, 1986:9). Buttressing this, James Eze asserts that “beyond these totems and profound meanings lies another oasis of symbolisms and unspoken communication” (2015:1).

No wonder Montgomery (2016: 17) asserts that “most Africans used the symbol of the master as a cloak for their own spirits”. To sum up this, in traditional religious practices

and systems, wonder masquerades would be described as a “hallmark of symbol of dignity, royalty, respect” in the tradition and hegemony of the people because of various functions it performs (NTI, 1990:86). Through the symbolism sacred masquerade like the wonder masquerade utilizes and the sacred ethos it invoke, however, it retains the power to influence the spiritual state of its users and to play a role in the religious consciousness of the Nzam people “by whom or for whom it is performed” (Dunbar-Hall, 2006:59).

It is imperative to note here that gin is one the most significant paraphernalia combined with ritual motifs used when the ritual activation of the wonder masquerade is being performed this is done in order that the ritual activation would retain the religious aspect of its values as well as social as decreed by the ancestors (Idigo, 2001:104-105). Its usage in the ritual outing of the wonder masquerade cult is very significant because during the initiation and cultic rites the ritualistic officers especially the sacred specialist or any other cultic functionaries in order to perform real magic and medicine for ritual activation of the masquerade, some reasonable number of gin and alligator pepper (*Ose-oji*) are combined ritualistically; in this sense it is believed to enhance its magic in its ritual performance of wonders while dancing.

In the area of spiritually enhancement and indoctrination, it is believed that no one knows the secret of the gin and the alligator pepper while the cult members of the wonder masquerade are being psychologically indoctrinated that no one will know their secret as to be able harm them hence they pray, they say: may their secrets not be known as that of alligator pepper. Indirectly, the initiates are being urged not divulge the secrets of the society (Nabofa, 1994). Nooter (1993:29) asserts that “the sanctions against disclosing secrets, and the serve taboos associated with membership in secret associations, contributes to the conservation of tradition, and to the transmission of knowledge and ritual practice from one generation to the next. The knowledge imparted to members of secret group is often sealed by the taking of vows, a characteristic part of initiation process”. This is the reason why Akintola (1992:21) opines that “in this re-enactment lies the promise that is held out to the trust and faithful initiate, that if he remains true to his training and faithful to his obligations in the mystical path of life and light, he will surely become the possessor of such god like wisdom, beneficence and power”. Apparently, it has been shown that it is through the prayer and chanting sections where the uses of gin and the alligator pepper (*Ose-oji*) before and during the outing/display of the wonder masquerade that “the visual language of many initiation rituals becomes increasingly abstract and metaphoric in the advanced stages” (Nooter, 1993:25).

Nonetheless, the gin and the alligator pepper acts as medium for inculcating moral truths to the initiated members in wonder masquerade fraternity because it is believed that through the usage “the method of regenerating him into a beneficial conformity with the laws of a virtuous life” would be achieved (Akintola, 1992:2-3). In fact, in the worldview of the Nzam people, membership or initiation into this fraternity is limited only to the worthy, and often and all cases, such membership commands a very high social standing in the respective lands native to all such fraternities. On this position, Akintola (1992:2-3) posits that “their *mode d employ*’ is also

similar. For example, they all operate by means of developing a body of “moral instruction” communicated to the initiated at meetings held under the seal of secrecy”.

Thus, the combined power of fiat inherent in this symbolic item called gin and alligator pepper (*Ose-oji*) in Igbo dialect is believed to act as propellers or catalysts to the priests’ supplication (Nabofa, 1994:62). It is interesting to note here that many traditional priests in African especially Igbo, Edo and Yoruba speaking priests combine the alligator pepper (*Ose-oji*) with bitter kola (*Akuiilu*) when they want to perform some serious rituals in order to facilitate their prayers towards God(s), deities and ancestors. It has been observed that the officiating priest chews the bitter kola and the alligator pepper as he prays for supplicant and/or curses an evil doer (Nabofa, 1994:62). The idea is that this item facilitates the esoteric or spiritual potency and efficacy of prayers and curses during some ritualized activities (Ejizu, 1986:51).

It can thus been seen that the pronouncements which the priest makes after drinking some quantity of the dry gin and eating of some seeds of alligator pepper can put him in an altered state of consciousness for a short period during which time further utterances will be made by him. Thus, dry gin and alligator pepper are viewed as special food for the gods and ancestors in traditional Igbo religion because they facilitate transcendent communication and receptivity. Through pouring and attaching these elements to the wonder masquerade, the masquerade becomes anthropomorphised insofar as it is assumed that the gin and the alligator pepper will have the same effect on ‘mind altering’ effect on the masquerade as it has on diviners – thus imbuing it with the power to speak to and for the ancestors or deities. In this wise, dry gin and the alligator pepper (*Ose-oji*) play a crucial role in expressing secret knowledge, but are not secret themselves. Rather, they serve as an agency through which complex relationship of secrecy and disclosure are negotiated and mediated” (Nooter, 1993:24).

### III. WONDER MASQUERADE AND THE ALIENATION OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN

In the tradition and culture of the Nzam people, wonder masquerade is highly prized and thus, in this patriarchal tradition, there are restrictions put upon women, non-initiates and children as they are prohibited from touching or seeing the wonder masquerade or from dancing to its tune. This is the reason why Joy Lo-Bamijoko (1987:23) affirms that “in Afikpo area, women are still not allowed to see or listen to these instruments while they talk” and they are not allowed to touch or carry them. Bruce Lincoln (1989:89) posits that integration of such laws “is necessary for the smooth and harmonious functioning of society is regularly sought and accomplished through numerous overlapping systems and mechanisms – among them law, pedagogy, etiquette, aesthetics and ideology, particularly religious ideology”. Reed & Hufbauer (2005:135-136) argue that through such sacred and magical masquerade, the Igbo concepts of gender are articulated and the restrictions of women through such masquerade is tied to ritual and political authority. Thomas Beidelman (1993:41 & 43) asserts that secrecy and the public

acknowledgement of concealment create an etiquette that helps further the aims of men who maintain the ritual and social hierarchy. Reed & Hufbauer affirms that “such carefully delimited categories maintain political boundaries and create categories of legitimate and illegitimate knowledge” (2005:136). In other words, it is the initiates that are legitimate here, while the illegitimate include men that are not initiated, women and minors. Against this background, through personal communication, participant 015, Mr. James, an Eighty-six year old initiate, explains that:

Women are not allowed to partake in such ritual dance because it is believed to be the dance for the gods and ancestors.

From the above assertions, it has been observed that in Nzam custom and tradition, women are not allowed to dance or partake in anything that concerns the wonder masquerade ritual because it is believed to be the dance for initiated men in the community who are the earthly representatives of the gods and ancestors. Equally significant is that not only women but also men that are not initiated and children. African feminist scholar, Amina Mama (1995:12) asserts that “such a view confers epistemic privilege on those who are disempowered and marginalized in our societies” and in this way women are enslaved by religious patriarchy. George Basden argues that although, sacred artifacts are said to “inspire fear, but practically it is the women and children who suffered intimidation” (1966:366). Participant 014, Mr Peter, a fifty-five year old initiate affirms that:

Women are not allowed to watch the wonder masquerade display or take part in its ritual dance. It is an abomination for them to do so.

From the above assertion of my participant, women generally are exempted from participating in anything that concerns the rituals of the rituals of the wonder masquerade and these rules tend to instigate dominance against them. Eric Ayisi asserts that “these rules have religious implications and people who overlook them feel a sense of guilt and seek ritual restoration” (1972:91). Likewise, Lo-Bamijoko argues that “the functions for which those instruments are used take place at night, in order that women may hear the instruments playing but not see either of them or the players” and this makes women invisible (1987:23). Warren D’Azevedo (1994:345), writing on *Poro* a secret society in Sierra Leone, affirms that “the position of women remains subordinated to that of men, because *Sande* may be viewed as an instrument of male control of women in which the high-ranking leaders of *Sande* engage in an ancient conspiracy with their dominant male lineage-mates to sustain the principles of patrimony”. Temple (1922) cited in Isichei (1983:289), writing from the context of *Dodo* secret society of Kagoma traditions, affirms that the “initiates were told that the whole society was really a conspiracy to keep their women folk in subjection”. Analytically, from the above, one would say that there is a deep connection between traditional religious practices and women domination particularly in the West African sub-region.

John Shepherd affirms that “male hegemony is essentially a visual hegemony”. He argues that “the male desire to control women therefore parallels their desire to control the world, which implies that women themselves must be

controlled and manipulated” (1987:154). Reed & Hufbauer argue that men link the dominance of male initiates of the wonder masquerade “to the control of women’s knowledge and behaviour, and describe it as an important means of dividing male and female responsibilities and privileges” (2005:136). Reed & Hufbauer further state that initiates of the wonder masquerade are “upheld as the custodians of its secrets and mysteries, whereas women, children, and uninitiated men are spectators who must nonetheless provide the necessary support” (2005:136). It is on this position that Pals (2009:109) explains that these profane persons, that is to say, “women and young men that are not yet initiated into the religious life are not allowed to touch or dance the music, they are only allowed to look at it from a distance and even this is only on rare occasions”. James Frazar concludes that “in general, we may say that the prohibition of women and the effects supposed to follow an infraction of rule, are exactly the same whether the persons to whom the things belong are sacred or what we might call unclean or polluted (1922:190).

#### IV. THE SACRED SPACE AND THE SOUND OF THE DRUM BEATS OF THE WONDER MASQUERADE

Equally significant, if not more important is the fact that the cult members of the wonder masquerade uses the outing festival as an avenue or occasion to commemorate their magical supremacy, and also an occasion for the subjects to reaffirm their solidarity and loyalty to the spirits that guards them, through paying of homage’s and tributes (Idigo, 2002:24). Also, during this period, the Nzam people gather around the wonder masquerade which has become a “gentrified space of entertainment and recreation” (Ventakesh, 2006:110), the “center point of cultural activity and important source of innovation in music and other forms of performance” (Wolcott, 1974:83). This convocation has been seen to “create the most festive atmosphere possible and therefore the most enticing environment to attract the spirits to come” (Sager, 2012:38). Sharp (2001:51) argues that “this is the point where sacred sound and architectural space intersect contributes significantly to experience meaning in sacred performance”. He asserts that it is in this situation that “sacred performance within sacred architectural space creates a new, unique dimension in the sound in order to make it symbolic” (Sharp, 2001:51). Nuckolls (1999:228) argues that “the term sound symbolism is used when a sound unit such as a phoneme, syllable, feature or tone is said to go beyond its linguistic function as a contrastive, non-meaning-bearing unit to directly express some kind of the meaning”. Reichard (1950:257) asserts that it is in this kind of occasion/arena that sounds like that of the chanting/songs for the wonder masquerade has the power to attract and exorcise evil, through mediation of “the performance of its good works that produce immunity against all evil influences” (Arkin, 1989:7). Nonetheless, according to Wosien:

Sacred space offers a centre for communication with the power. It is the locality where its dramatic breakthrough into the world is commemorated. Sacred space, as the structured locality where man established the dominion of his gods, is the known space, the locality where the power manifests and

repeats its revelation; it is the place where the gods has stopped in movement and has created. This site, by virtue of man's acts of worship, becomes a centre for communion. Outside this enclosed area, beyond the known world, is the realm of chaos, the terrifying unknown space where forms disintegrate (1992:23).

Wosien (1992:21) again argues that such sacred space "symbolizes the union of time and space within evolution, the incarnation of timeless energy, which manifests in the dual aspects of nature". Drewal (1975:18) asserts that such sacred place has "become a symbol of place at which the living and the spiritual can meet and unite". It is in this sacred space that the Nzam community shows their solidarity with the wonder masquerade, which makes itself available and accessible to be seen during his public appearances and cheered by his subjects while dancing. Idigo (2001:166) observes that for the fact that the wonder masquerade dances to the musical drum which has "an Igala musical background" and its costumes that has an artistic connection "of Nupe origin for an audience of art connoisseurs' revealed that long standing patronage relationship existing between Nupe artists and the Hausa-Fulani aristocracy" Perani & Wolff (1999:123-124). Onwuejeogwu (1981:91) asserts that the musicians are all members of the masquerades "minimal lineage". During the outing ceremony, the performers usually sum up the progress of the previous year with the drums, praise the wonder masquerade and wish everybody well. Echezona (1963) argues that the masquerade does not come out to dance unless his royal drums invite it; then it appears with his drummers dancing and chanting while the excited crowds cheer for joy.

As a point of emphasis, Onwuejeogwu (1981:90) asserts that the wonder masquerade is led around the arena while dancing alongside by a native doctor with his staff because he serves as "an instrument of communication, symbol of power and believed to be adept traditional doctor". In this dancing arena also the wonder masquerade and its "retinue dance around the open arena with rhythm and music that stir the crowd into unconscious emotion, nodding of heads and waving of hands, a sight which can be better felt than described" (Idigo, 1990:34). This is because "its powerful effects defy analysis" (Watkins, 2004:186) in the sense that "the blending vibration coming from the music sways the whole congregation and it is not difficult for any one, whether member or not, to be moved, while the lending dictates the various steps of the dance" (Nabofa, 2005:358). Nketia (1975:22) aptly observes that peoples' participation in music and dance is "an important means of strengthening the social bonds that bind them and the values that inspire their corporate life". It is on this position that Lawrence Grossberg (1995:370) argues that "there is little reason to privilege the live performance as if it were unmediated or as the only viable source of an authentic experience". Ilesanmi (1996:5) argues that it is in this form that "these groups keep the traditional religion alive, annually looking forward to what gods has in store for them. Practice keeps religion alive; oral tradition makes it lively; the potency of predictions reassures the members and forces them to renew their faith in the deities". Buttressing this further, Wosien (1992:27) describes such ritual dance thus "the dancers, having danced into the labyrinth from right to left, the direction of involution and

death, turn round the centre and, following their leader dance out again, now in the opposite direction, that of evolution and birth. The pattern of the spirals in the Geranos dance signifies the continuation of life beyond death, the intimation of immortality at the very core of human experience".

According to Katrina Hazzard-Donald (2011:196) the outing space for the wonder masquerade is "a sacred circle which represent a separate and sacred realm that connect one to the ancestors and reconfirm continuity through both time and space". Wosien (1992:21) affirms that such sacred space becomes "zones where the sacred is experienced and worshipped. She stresses that "the beginning of both time and creation pertains to the centre. From this focal point manifestations radiate out in concentric rings. This universal experience has found expression in the many circumambulation rites and round dances of the sacred traditions of the world" (1992:21-22). Hazzard-Donald (2011:196) argues that within such sacred circle, the interaction between the king, the initiates and Nzam community is mediated through "sacred spiritual forces evidenced in spirit possession" (2011:196) and while in that state they see themselves as "heros whose knowledge, mystic power, wealth and prestige equals that of any man" (Guenther, 1975:165).

Conversely, it has been shown that the drum beats of the wonder masquerade invokes the magical spirit on the masquerade when played and danced during ritual outing, this is why Koster (2011:177) asserts that "the community in this ritual is the victim, while other observers in the ritual serve as the symbolic representation of the community that needs healing, while simultaneously serving as witness to the ceremony". Sounds like that of the drum beat sound of the wonder masqueraded is a "powerful medium for connecting to and accessing the effective power of spirits" (De Witte, 2008:692).

Nonetheless, Ohadike (2007:10) argues that "it is hard for Africans to go into spiritual possession without the help of instrumental or vocal music". Ilesanmi (1996:5) writing in the on context of Yoruba women in the worship of *Orinlase* in Ilawe-Ekiti asserts that "before the ritual dance, they first pay homage to the deities individually and collectively. They kneel down, touch the ground with their heads almost in the...style without the other body gesticulations of...Then follows the praise song in honour of the deities", thereby "creating an indelible impression in the minds of the individuals and communities, who also serve as a participating audience" (Ilesanmi, 1996:9). Echeruo (1975:60) argues that the traditional Igbo festivals like the outing of the wonder masquerade of the Nzam people holds on the position that ritual "drama is the externalization of archetypal relationships and issues; that behind the action of every drama, whether of gods or men, there is an essentially philosophic and even cosmic argument or statement dependent on or derived from the analogy of an antecedent or generic mythos". The drum beat sound as a talking drum during the outing ceremony, "directs the wonder masquerade or the cult members "on dancing steps/skills to display during public outing to avoid mistakes and to enable them win public acclamations during their initiations in foot-work dances" (Ogwezzy, 1999 cited in NOUN, 2009:79). No wonder, Michael Zogry (2011:20)

reaffirms that this kind of ancient ritual is “a ceremonial landscape imbued with sacred significance”.

Arguably, Ilesanmi (1996:5) asserts that it is during such ritual dance that “the deity himself possesses some of them, making them perform feats beyond the normal capacity of the generality of the people”. Nti (1990:115) argues that “as a dance of brave people, all parts of the body are used in the dance. The movements show sharp turns of the body, quick rising and falling linear and circular formations”. NOUN (2009:112) affirms that “the music tells of heroism, valiancy and intrepidity. Only those who could brave the night could foot-touch the drum or ascend it. No coward, however rich, can dare it. The dance is only for the brave”. In terms of the analysis of the ritual dance of the wonder masquerade, Clavir (1996:100) argues that for the people like the Nzam community, any “potent” masquerade like the wonder masquerade “commands respect and can give rise to prohibitions as to who may view, touch or use it”, because it is for some selected people—the initiates.

It is through this method that the initiates who are also the custodians of the sacred canopies of the community “pursue practices and ideals embedded within a tradition that has historically accorded women a subordinate status” (Mahmood, 2005:4-5), and confers “male religious authority” which upholds patriarchy in Igbo cosmology (Mahmood, 2001:217). African feminist scholar, Amina Mama (1995:12) laments that “such a view confers epistemic privilege on those who are disempowered and marginalized in our societies” and in this way women are enslaved by religious patriarchy. George Basden argues that although, sacred artifacts are said to “inspire fear, but practically it is the women and children who suffered intimidation” (1966:366).

No wonder Guenther (1975:164) asserts that such “great dancers are widely idolized – especially by boys and youths adults – their song, their idiosyncrasies of dancing and their exploits are talked about widely”, and in that form they are “searching for spiritual ideal” (Warren, 2006:106), and “personal identity” (Alford, 1988:51). Guenther (1975:164) argues that “to a large extent the wealth, prestige and glamour of the dancers stem directly from the dance and its inherent affective, integrative and moral power”. Kealiinohomok (1997:69) asserts that such dance “encodes and decodes myth and rituals and at the same time, danced rituals are always being invented, retrofitted, or re-invented either through revival or syncretism”.

Nonetheless, Nketia (1989:121) argues that the interaction that takes place on the ritual dance of the wonder masquerade during any outing is not “confined to musical behaviour that seeks to establish a relationship with the unseen or affirm the bonds of a common faith and shared values that bind members to ensure not only effective communication but also the required atmosphere for action and interaction”. According to Andreas Heuser, the dancing of the wonder masquerade “requires constant concentration, exact co-ordination and strict timing. It happens in ongoing repetitions of rhythmic and musical units that come close to a practice of meditation. The repetitive cycle, so to speak, harmonises all movements in the same control of action. The music has spiritual connotation and it is a way of interaction with the divine sphere”

(2008:40). Sager (1993:106) argues that “the repetitions do not change anything, they only make it better”.

Until recently during the wonder masquerade outing, its dance according to Benjamin Ray is the main religious dance/ceremony of the Nzam community “which they perform” (2000:28). Sundermeier (1991:50) argues that sound emanating from such sacred drum “encode...memory with ritual aesthetics, and crystallize historical knowledge in religious performance”. Davis (2012:166) affirms that the sacred drum dance performed there is traditionally a “dance of respect”. The masquerades appearance on different occasions respectively through the mediating of its drum beats and chanting make the initiates “to dance savagely in the courtyard of the impertinent” (Gleason, 1980:165) and entertain the onlookers.

#### V. CHANTING THE WONDER MASQUERADE REINFORCING THE POWER OF THE SPIRITS

According to Monica Tunnell (2014:1) “the chanting of Mantra is based in the power of vibration as both healer and invoker. One does not need to subscribe to a particular religion or spiritual tradition to benefit from this practice”. She further argues that “this powerful sound is one that is heard fairly frequently and this practice of chanting is based in the power of sound vibration”. Frits Staal (1986:40) asserts that “since ritual is one the main areas of research common to anthropology and science of religion, one might expect that the latter science should have been inspired by linguistics or logic as well”. Deborah Kapchan (2013:138) writing from the Islamic perspective asserts that “chanting is part of the laws of Islam and individual meditation with a particular litany of prayers in the morning and sometimes at night; congregating with other Sufis to perform the liturgy in common once or twice weekly; chanting the names of God together, both silently and aloud; and singing praise hymns to God, the Prophet Mohammed, and other saints”. She further affirms that it is in this way that “the initiate in Sufism ascends in levels of gnosis that are experiential” (Kapchan, 2013:138). Brian Larkin (2004:96) asserts that “*Qadiriyya* Sufis gather at certain mosques for the public performance of the *dhikr*, the ritual that uses the *bandiri* drum to regulate the speed of chanting litanies”.

It is on this position that Deborah Sprague (2013:106) argues that “the limitations of our space affected our chanting practices. For effective chant, the body must find good posture ... From experience in chant; one attends to the breath moving through the body, the resonance of sound within the body as vibration of Holy breath, and the sound of the community as a whole”. It is on this position that Regula Qureshi (1997:288) echoes that in the recitational soundscape of Moslem assemble, the sound of recited Islamic words envelops the individual and punctuates daily life, creating a sonic identity for those who share this tradition. Chappelle Deschamps (1967:39) asserts that such ritual practice is “based principally on proverbs or maxims. Miller Ivor (2005:26) argues that the ceremonies consist of drum, dance, and chanting activities using esoteric languages and the knowledge of these chants has been restricted to members because its ritual language is

enveloped in multiplicity of meanings. Michael Nabofa (1994:39) asserts that “those who are knowledgeable in this area can easily decode meanings from their various sounds and rhythms”. Judith Becker (2004:54) holds that such “deep listener’s share the ability to strong emotional arousal to musical stimulation”. Bob Gluck (2005:39) affirms that “the experience is akin to chanting while engaged in traditional prayer movements”.

It is on this position that Nabofa (1994:73) affirms that chanting are always vehicles for conveying certain sentiments of truth and they are very powerful vehicles for communicating religious beliefs in Africa because they are usually short phrases which can be easily grasped and most of these are used both in worship and also in social activities. John Hausmann (2013:58) writing from Christian context affirms that by chanting the names of the Lord one will be free. According to DeVale (1989:107) chanting through the mediation of sacred sounds “may relate to healing, physical strength, farming and hunting, safeguarding villages, or help with family problems, and musical instruments may facilitate spirit possession and exorcism, or serve as vehicles for communication between the world of the seen and the unseen”. Ansara & Gass (1999:1) argues that “not only is chanting a form of meditation in itself, but chant is also an extremely useful adjunct to other spiritual practices. Because of its powerful ability to calm the mind, chanting can serve as a helpful bridge between our busy lives of work”. Through, the symbolism it utilizes and the sacred ethos it invokes, however, it retains the power to influence the spiritual state of its performers and to play a role in the religious consciousness of a community by whom or for whom it is performed (Dunbar-Hall, 2006:59). It is on this position that Robert Wuthnow (1992:19) explains that chanting in “religious rituals provide mechanisms for containing the potentially disruptive experiences of mourning on the one hand, or of transcendent joy on the other”. No wonder Loren Kajikawa (2012:138) affirms that chanting as part of sacred sound of “African religions and black popular music are closely related and share a common spiritual function”.

#### VI. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WONDER MASQUERADE AS A LINK BETWEEN THE LIVING AND DEAD

This wonder masquerade “provide the protection from the envy and competition of others” (Ogbu, 2000:61). In the realm or space of magic and medicine, spirit forces could be tapped for both salient and destructive purposes. Thus, the core element of the primal religiosity in this culture theater is the cult of ancestor (Ogbu, 2000:62). According to Drewal (1977:49) “the heads or the top of these mediating figures literally operate in two realms—realms accessible only through those persons and objects that have been specially endowed for transcendence. Projections from the top, then, are a dominant symbol of the vital force of a divine associate; and in their various forms and context they may characterize the particular nature of that force”. Symbolically, the vertical projections in these various context and forms may be said to act as an avenue of divine, with vital ingredients embedded at their bases to facilitate spiritual presence (Drewal, 1977:49).

It is very significant to mention here that before the wonder masquerade would be carried out for public outing, offering of certain paraphernalia like pouring of gin on the two heads must be placed beneath them. In fact, it has been observed that nowhere is the concept of inner secret and magical power more evident than in ritual activation of wonder masquerade iconography. The masquerade as an ordinary cloth with two heads is placed inside an approximately three feet rectangular basket which the indigenous people of Nzam community call ‘*Apkeleku or Ukpa*’ in ordinary Igbo tonal dialect carried by an initiate where it basically represents spirits from the realm of the ancestors. The *Apkeleku* is the same length and weight of a door. According to Chukwuma Okoye:

The masquerade’s composite multivalency offers a rich unrestricted canvas for the hosting of influences from virtually every expressive form ranging from music, design, or visual arts, dance, poetry, and drama, to even architecture and media technology. Pieces obtained from foreign cultural forms are recontextualized and inserted into entirely different symbolic systems, thereby deploying them in making of meanings which are radically indifferent to the operational codes within they operated in their natal environments. In this case the pieces enrich the cultural integrity of the masquerade tradition without bearing with them significant traces of their original expressive systems (2010:25).

During its performance, the masquerade displays its wonders through the mediation of an ordinary cloth rising mysteriously and magically to the height of more than a four storey building while dancing equally. In fact, the African magical art ritually and mystically implanted in the wonder masquerade works in such a way that it rises so tall in the shy and collapses like a balloon on the ground at the same time entertaining the on lookers while performing. In the cause of this, the cult members would simultaneously be chanting along side with sound of the drums to show and to convey special message to the initiates to the on lookers before its dancing and entertainment. The sequences of the songs are:



Figure 1: The Wonder Masquerade rising from the ground (Courtesy of Madukasi Francis Chuks)





Figure 2: The Wonder Masquerade lying on the ground  
(Courtesy of Madukasi Francis Chuks)

Female and children must not come close to the wonder masquerade.

Wonder Please stand up!

Wonder!

Every male, adult or child must uncover his head.

Wonder Please stand up!!

Wonder!!

This means ritually that any male person that wears a cap must remove it.

Wonder Please, Please stand up!!!

Wonder!!!

Any pregnant woman must hide herself from wonder masquerade, to secure herself of safe delivering.

Wonder Please, Please stand up!!!!

Wonder!!!!

None members of the seven initiated members could be dancing and rejoicing with the wonder masquerade but must not touch it.

Wonder Please, Please stand up!!!!!!

Wonder!!!!!!

Wonder masquerade is a holy masquerade and does not accept evil. So witches and wizards must go away from the wonder masquerade unless it strikes them to death.

Wonder Please, Please stand up!!!!!!!

Wonder!!!!!!!

Any one that needs justice can come to wonder masquerade to seek for justice.

Wonder Please, Please stand up!!!!!!!

Wonder!!!!!!!

Interpretatively, the initiates are using the ritual chanting and songs to plead with the masquerade to rise up and perform its wonders. This could be the reason why Michael Young Nabofa asserts that "it has quite often been observed that magic is an attempt on the part of man to tap and control the super-natural resources of the universe for his own benefits" (1992:64). Here, Bolaji Idowu (1973:189) concedes that man "recognizes that behind phenomena is a power 'wholly other' than himself. His approach to this power depends on his conception of the power and the way which he believes would lead to the goal of his soul's sincere desire". He stresses that "where he recongnizes the power as a divine being with whom man may have communion and communication, his approach

has been one of submission and appeal; where he conceives of the power only as the reservoir of elemental forces, he has sought to tap and harness it and make it subserve his own end" (Idowu, 1973:189). In this wise, "these mystical forces of the universe are neither evil nor good in themselves, they are just like other natural things at man's disposal" (Mbiti, 1977:165). Writing in the context of *Egungun* masquerade of the Yoruba, Margaret Thompson Drewal comments that "performance of *Egungun* affirm the Yoruba belief in the intercession of ancestors in the affairs of their descendants while precautions to prevent the audience from touching the performers reinforce the separation of the two realms" (1977:44). This is why the veneration of the respected dead constitutes one of the commonest features of African liturgies, but it bears only a slight resemblance to our cult of the dead (Zahan, 2000:10).

## VII. CONCLUSION

The linkage between the wonder masquerade and the ancestral spirit is evident in the ritual make up of the embodiment of masquerades in Igbo cosmology. Nonetheless, African magic and medicine where secrecy is enveloped and concealed in the head projection of costumes as it pertains to the wonder masquerade of the Nzam people and its regalia along side with its ritual paraphernalia is ritually managed and contained during the performance of the wonder masquerade of the Nzam people of Igbo origin.

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