

## **Playing with Our Ancestors: Culture and Communal Memory in Igbo Masquerade Theatre<sup>1</sup>**

Osita Okagbue

*Goldsmiths, University of London, UK*

---

### **Introduction: Culture and Performance**

According to Victor Turner, 'cultures are most fully expressed and made conscious of themselves through ... rituals and theatrical performances' (1980 quoted in Schechner and Appel, 1990, p, 1); Turner goes on to add that while declaring our shared humanity, each performance – by which he means rituals, theatre and other such specialised activities - suggests the uniqueness of the culture out of which it has emerged. (Okagbue 2007, p, 3) In the same book the author also argues that every culture has its own tradition of theatre and performance, its own forms and modes of artistic expression. Each culture has its own framework and language for organising, presenting, describing and assessing its artistic impulses and manifestations, including its theatre and performance processes. (Okagbue, 2007, p, 3) This is to say that every culture devises its performances based on a set of grammars and vocabularies that are generally understood by members of that culture. Turner's ideas about performance and its relationship to culture envisions a world in which there is mutual respect and appreciation of cultural difference and for Turner one of the best ways of doing this is 'by entering one another's performances and learning their grammars and vocabularies' (1980 in Schechner and Appel, 1990, p 1).

There is no doubt that there exists a close relationship between culture and theatre or performance. This relationship is of a dialectical nature, in that the two mutually affect each other; on the one hand, culture provides the source and material for the theatre, while on the other, the theatre reflects and has the capacity to change culture. This close relationship testifies to the fact that every art form – this includes the theatre – belongs to an age, a place, and a specific geographical, social and cultural

context. In the case of Igbo masking theatre, it is informed and shaped by Igbo culture, history and contemporary realities, while Igbo culture and society are in turn revealed in and through the masquerade performances. Thus, this is a relationship of mutual affect. However, of significance to the theme culture, history and communal memory being explored in this essay, is the fact that because of this dialectical and mutually affective relationship between performance and culture, Igbo masked performances very often offer glimpses of the processes and instances of the interactions, mediations and negotiations between the masquerade theatre and Igbo culture and society. What one finds fascinating, and often amused by, watching a masquerade performance is how the religious pragmatism of the Igbo is captured in the fact that although most Igbo people have converted to Christianity, yet, there is an ambivalent attitude bordering on reverence displayed by people/spectators when they are in the presence of a masked figure. This surely is an attitude that vividly reflects the conflicted pull that the Igbo feel between their acquired Christian faith and doctrine, and the abiding and residual belief born of a pre-Christian Igbo religion in the existence of spirits and the ability of these spirits - ancestors are included in the category of spirits in the Igbo universe - to influence human life and action. But while the first observation fascinates one, the second observation is a bit troubling and is something that will become more obvious further in the paper and ultimately, one hopes, will be explored further by other scholars and Igbo society at large. This second observation is the fact that in many indigenous African performances while a sizeable number of the characters and a significant proportion of the spectators are women, only men and male actors organise and feature as actors in these theatrical performances. This observation was particularly obvious in the *Koteba* of the Bamana of Mali and *Mmonwu* performances of the Igbo of Nigeria both of which I had studied extensively.

Of course, as already pointed out above, theatre performances are very much part of the cultural and social processes of society and they are therefore implicated in questions of power and identity, the politics of its construction and representation. Thus, the marginalisation of women in most spheres of public life in Igbo and Bamana societies is graphically reflected in the fact that in the two performance traditions, women remain on the sidelines, often on the receiving end of male articulations of male, female and other identities and social issues. Women's views, their gender identities and the power to occupy and thus speak from the public domain are denied and usurped by the dominant male 'Others' who use this exclusion to maintain hold on power. The view of this essay, taken all this into account, is that very often a theatrical performance can be a good

indicator or a reflection of the culture or society from which it originates, and that perhaps changing the mechanics and dynamics of performance could be a way to challenge and hopefully change the mechanics and dynamics of society. (Okagbue, 2007, pp12-13) However, the concern of this paper is more about how the masquerade theatre because of this unique relationship between theatre and culture performs the essential role of being the platform and agent for documenting, preserving and displaying Igbo culture, history and collective memory. But in order to do this, we need to understand the ideas underpinning the Igbo masking tradition and practice.

### **The Mask Idea in Igboland**

The art of masquerade performance in Igboland is religious and theatrical at the same time; it is ritual, but it is also entertainment. It is almost impossible to separate one from the other - one cannot easily divorce the religious element from the theatrical element when in the presence of the masked figure. This means in effect that Igbo masking theatre is a theatre form steeped in performativity, that is to say, it is a theatre that goes beyond the merely entertaining to actually seek to either bring into being or in some instances to directly affect the reality that it portrays (for more on the notion of performativity as a key aspect of African performance and theatre epistemology, see Igweonu and Okagbue 2013, pp1-16). This is what enables it to be simultaneously theatre and ritual. It is therefore necessary to understand the nature of indigenous Igbo religion in order to grasp the idea that underpins Igbo masking and thus its inherent value to Igbo culture. Central to Igbo cosmology is the belief in the existence of spirits and their ability to influence the lives of human beings. In addition, Igbo religion is anchored on an essential dualism - of spirit and matter - in which there is mutual dependence between the two. Within the Igbo cosmos is the belief that every object or phenomenon in nature has two aspects to it, matter and spirit that are beneficially complementary. However, the Igbo, like many of their African neighbours, place the spiritual above the material and this perhaps explains the reverence accorded to the masked figures that appear at Igbo performances - they are believed to be spirits that have taken on material form in order to come and commune with the living.

For the Igbo, life exists at three different planes - that of the dead, of the living, and of the unborn. The three planes correspond to the past, the present and the future respectively. Soyinka (1973, 1993, p, 29) in outlining this tripartite structure or planes of the African universe also captures the contiguity that exists between the three planes and time frames when

he writes that 'life, present life, contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn'. That is to say that the 'world of the living is understood to contain within it affective memories of the world of the dead and also hopeful intimations of the world of the unborn. In other words, within the present are...visions and aspects of the past and the future.' (Okagbue 1997, p, 91) We will see later in the essay how this fact enables the masquerade to mediate between the planes of the living and the dead with its capacity to function as the storehouse of Igbo culture, history and communal memory. It is also important to point out the fact that overarching the three planes and often mediating between and sometimes intervening in them is the domain of the gods and nature forces. What connects all the planes is constant movement and interaction, articulated by religion and usually facilitated by various rites of passage and transition. We will shortly see how the masking tradition is one such rite or act of transition, mediation and intervention between the plane of the living and the dead, and between the spiritual and material worlds of the Igbo universe.

Elsewhere, I have argued that Igbo masquerade theatre is the 'Igbo people's playful way of dealing with the universe within which they find themselves, of actualising and interacting with all the superhuman forces which exist within this world, but it is also a mode through which they achieve transport into an imaginary and higher reality via the creative world of play'. (Okagbue, 1997, p, 106) However, as this paper contends, this attempt at 'playing' with the ancestors and the spirit forces of the Igbo universe is much more serious than just ludic diversion, for underneath this activity is an active religious intent. One of the key functions of religion in most cultures and contexts is to help a community or people to understand and explain the mysteries of the universe, while concomitantly securing a measure of control over the unseen forces that they have to contend with. In the case of the Igbos, the key forces of the universe that they desire most to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with are the gods, nature forces (such as the spirits of streams, animals, plants, inanimate objects, natural phenomena such as thunderstorms, lightning, draught, famine, epidemics etc.), the ancestors and the unborn. Thus, religion provides the Igbo with the tools to give form to a formless and often chaotic universe. As pointed out previously, different planes make up the Igbo universe, and there is constant movement and journeys between them; these movements are however negotiated through rites of transference. The rites include nuptial rites, birth rites, funerary rites, and on occasions, oracular rites and rites of material and spiritual substitution and substantiation. The journeys can be either way, from the spiritual to the material through birth and from material to the spiritual through death.

However, masking offers the Igbo another means through which the journey from the spiritual back to the material can be achieved, albeit temporarily so as to make the cyclic nature of Igbo thought complete.

Masking, therefore, offers the Igbo a useful and vital ritual of return that enables the departed ancestors or the spirits to visit in order to commune with the living. Masquerades are a manifestation of the spiritual on the material plane. Through the mask the Igbo are able to confer corporeality on the spirits who form the centrepiece of their religious thought and practice; in a sense therefore, masking translates an abstract belief into a tangible usable reality and practical activity. In religious terms, both the ancestors, nature spirits and the deities are ideas born of the Igbo collective imagination, but who need to be given flesh and activated in order for direct and immediate contact to occur. The periodic physical manifestation of the ancestors and gods ensures that the continuity between the worlds of the Igbo universe is kept graphically and usefully alive and the masks with their explicit symbolism and performative dynamism do this very well. Their usefulness in terms of the survival and continuity of Igbo culture, in my view, is without question. For it is through,

masks that Igbo ancestors and nature gods participate directly and physically in human affairs. When they come as masks we can play with them, feed them, bribe them, and even scold them when they've let us down. We can touch and hear them and be touched and be heard by them. (Okagbue, 1993, p, 11)

This fact makes Igbo masking both a performance and a performative act, for while on the one hand, it is theatrical, but the masquerades are also a direct visit and intervention of the spiritual on the material plane, of the ancestors on their living descendants. The spirits when they visit are expected to actually affect and change things for the living – reinforce norms, settle quarrels, reprimand and admonish miscreants, bring wisdom, educate the living, and generally make life better for their human guests. But how, then, does Igbo masking theatre contribute to the memorialisation and periodic reactivation of Igbo culture and history? This is done in the way the masks are conceived, designed, realised and brought into being through performance.

### **Mask Types and Design**

In the conception and design of the masks the Igbo are able to embody and encode Igbo past, present and projections of the future, which the performances are meant to and have the ability to do. A major feature of

Igbo masking is the high level of abstraction evident in the conception and design realisation of the masks – this is irrespective of whether the masks are facial masks or whether they are overall covering which conceals the performer. The Igbo are not different from other African cultures and societies in which art works are deliberately abstracted and the goal is often not realistic representation of or a physical resemblance between the art work and the object being depicted. There is, in fact, usually a marked departure from any representational accuracy or closeness in most African art – whether it is painting, sculpture or carving. What is sought for in African art in general is therefore the ideal and not the real. Unsurprisingly, Igbo theatre often signifies through symbolism, thus hardly are attempts made to realistically portray human characters, even in the more recent performances in which the figures come close to human faces; yet even in this, degrees of generic representation remains the norm, with essential features of the character or object highlighted but also stylised or distorted at the same time. Animal characters, however, combine symbolic and realistic portrayals, but also with a degree of stylisation or distortion to achieve a similar level of generic representation, which is then enhanced by costume and the display of the essential characteristics of the animal through performance. An interesting question to consider is: Why do the Igbo do this? Why do they avoid realistic or anything close to a physical resemblance in their portrayal of human characters or other phenomena? The answer, in my view, is very relevant to the theme being explored in this paper. A characteristic of the Igbo conception of life is the idea of the impermanence manifest in and by nature. Nothing is fixed and this idea of impermanence and non-fixity provides the guiding principle in most Igbo cultural practices and forms of artistic expression – these range from building houses, sculpture, painting, carving, and even in the creation and keeping of gods. Realistic portrayals and physical resemblance, as in photographic representations, go against this mode of perception as they seek to fix things that resist being fixed. The second reason for this desire for impermanence is also the fact that Igbo art, by its symbolism and suggestiveness, is intended to allow space for the creative engagement of the spectator or viewer with the work of art – that is to say, Igbo art works are not closed; they rather invite the spectator to complete the process of art through interpretation. Thus Barthes argument that the death of the author signals the birth of the reader in a process in which meaning is not the responsibility of the author but rather the preserve of the reader (see Barthes' essay, 'The Death of the Author', 1967, 1977, pp142-8) is pretty much a well-established mode of artistic engagement in Igbo culture, as in other African cultures. When transferred into the mask context, keeping the features of the

masks generic secures the need for impermanence as well as representing the generalised understanding of Igbo masked characters belonging to a community of indeterminate spirits made up of ancestors, deities, animals and nature forces. The goal of representation therefore is to capture or suggest the essence or key features to help the audience to complete the picture of what is being represented in their minds.



Figure 1: Akuezuozo – Enemma Festival Nkpor, Anambra State, 1993

What is evident, however, in the medley of characters that populate Igbo masquerade theatre is that they encompass the spectrum of Igbo experience with the result that whatever does not appear as a character or is not represented within the world of this theatre does not exist, has not yet happened or is outside the universe of Igbo experience. Thus, it is accurate to say that there are as many characters and mask types as there are Igbo ideas and experiences. But it is important though to point out that Igbo masking theatre is not just about faces carved in wood or other materials. The masks can be anthropomorphous (having human shape and appearance), theriomorphic (having the shape of an animal), or therianthropic (having the ability to shapeshift or combine human and animal forms). The masks can also be distortions of a face, a quality or a characteristic; they can, for instance, be amorphous bundles of raffia or grass that move or prance about in mysterious/magical ways, or they can be innocuous heaps of cloth that amazingly rise and shrink during a performance – such as the famous Wonder Masquerade or *Orimili Obue Otaa*

(Ocean that Swells and Shrinks).

But in general, ideas, concepts, notions and phenomena such as beauty, elegance, ugliness, power, force, strength, terror, wonder, chastity, strangeness, inscrutability, wisdom and age, nobility, agility, mystery, wealth, and sometimes, disease, infirmity, predominate in the design motifs.

Occasionally though, one comes across a combination of more than one of these motifs in a single mask or character. A good example is Akuezuozo (Fig 1) – a popular male masquerade character in the Nkpor masking tradition and I know this character exists under different names in other towns and contexts throughout Igboland. Akuezuozo is the premier ancestor and king of all the masks in Nkpor, and as such is highly respected by both other masquerades and the spectators. His face is extremely distorted and ugly to look at, yet this face is meant to suggest wisdom, power, nobility, inscrutability and wealth – all symbolised by the red cap with many eagle feathers that he wears on his head. Of course, in Igboland only men of status are entitled or allowed to wear red caps, and the number of eagle feathers on a cap is a marker of the wearer's level of achievement in wealth and community politics. All these features are complemented by the fact that he is carrying an elephant tusk (this in itself is a sign of wealth); his physique - wide chest and enormous potbelly – help to reinforce these qualities. Adamma is another popular character of the Igbo masquerade repertory.

The Adamma mask is meant to represent the Igbo idea of virginal beauty and radiance – this is made up of a smooth skin, high cheek bones, slightly pointed nose, clear innocent and translucent eyes, a fully formed mouth, rich and shiny black hair, all these natural attributes are accentuated by jewellery and make-up. There are other characters in the Igbo repertory, such as Onuku, the Fool, whose blank face is marked by 'his vacant eyes, pallid skin, wide and protruding forehead, and a leering tongue' which suggest 'both his stupidity and rampant sexuality'. (Okagbue, 2007, p, 48) What obtains in general in Igbo masking is the existence of character types such as Adamma described above who belongs to the general category of Agbogho Mmuo (Daughter masquerade) while Akuezuozo belongs to the Ezemmuo/Nnammuo category; there others like the Ogoli/Nnemmuo/Mother masquerade, Law Enforcement (policeman, soldier, court clerk), Okwomma (these are energetic, knife or axe-wielding masquerades of young men with heads that range from horn-bearing animals to distorted human heads and faces); the Foreigner (Hausa kola nut seller; White District Officer, ); animal characters (which include the elephant, whale, lion, giraffe, antelope, deer, ram, eagle, porcupine etc. The audience who attend these performances are presumed to



have a level of semiotic intelligence to decipher the signs abstracted and encoded on the faces and bodies of these characters; they, of course, are helped by the specific *mythos*, which informs the character and the context in which they appear.

### **Repositories of History and Communal Memory**

As already highlighted at the beginning of this paper, every culture devises performance types that are expressive and part of, as well as being integral to its social and cultural processes; through performance, as Turner argues, 'the central meanings, values and goals of a culture are seen "in action" as they shape and explain behaviour'. (1990, p, 1) This means that through theatre and performance one is able to have a glimpse of the complex patterns of social intercourse between people within society; that is, one is able to have intimations of the social processes, historical movements and cultural shifts that a society or culture has gone through in the past or is experiencing at that particular moment in its history and as Maria Shevtsova (1993, p, ix) rightly points out 'no matter where it is constructed, the theatre vibrates with the movements of its society'.

The arts in general have always been functional in most African cultures and societies, and Igbo masquerade theatre clearly fulfils this functional expectation and imperative. Igbo masking performs three closely related functions; the first is its religious/ritual function; the second is its socio-political function, and the third is its artistic and aesthetic function. In relation to the first, masking facilitates the continuity and communion between the human and spiritual planes of the Igbo universe. The dead ancestors and other spirits take on material form as masquerades to come back and interact with their living descendants – they come to provide the living with information, knowledge, answers to perplexing questions that help the latter to cope with the uncertainties of life. This theatre enables the Igbo to practically perform or live their religious beliefs and faith. However, more significantly, at a psychological/psychic level, giving form to the formless or making the invisible visible, masking is a ritual performance that enables the Igbo to understand and control their world through playfully performing their anxieties and fears, their joys and sorrows, as well as their successes and failures. It is in fact a context for generating and exchanging knowledge, for communal soul-searching and for healing.

In its socio-political role, masking acts simultaneously as a context and an instrument for socialisation and social control. In Igbo communities such as Nkpor on which much of the research for this study was

based and where initiation into the masquerade cult is a pre-requisite for participation in masking activities, the initiation night is a momentous event and an occasion for the young boys who are expected to become 'men' at the end of the night's ordeal. The main point of the initiation rite is to mentally and physically 'terrorise' but test the boys and push the boy initiates to the limits of their endurance before they are pronounced worthy of being called men. However, accompanying and underpinning this declaration of manhood are revelations of the mysteries surrounding the masquerade tradition, instructions about the history of origins of the town, as well as injunctions about their newly entrusted responsibility as men and therefore custodians of communal morality, secrets, history and lore. This is of course followed by an oath of secrecy by each boy-man not to reveal any of the knowledge gained to non-initiates, and in particular women, including their mothers, sisters and aunts. In addition or as part of this role of being an instrument of social control, Igbo masking on occasions is intricately involved in the politics of Igbo society through its judicial role. As well as bringing information, knowledge and answers to the questions and problems of their human guests, the ancestors are on occasions asked to mediate and pronounce on intractable matters in the human community, and because of the reverence and higher status they enjoy as spirits within the Igbo universe, their judgements on issues in dispute are taken seriously and quite often are binding.

The third function which Igbo masking performs is the artistic/aesthetic one. While being a religious/ritual practice, Igbo masking is also a theatrical performance. Theatre by its very nature is a composite art form as it has the ability and often relies on bringing together a variety of art forms and artists. This ability to host a combination of many art forms in a single container means that the theatre is able to put these art forms on display for the audience to experience, appreciate and assess. But above and beyond its display function, Igbo masking is central to the setting of the aesthetic standards of Igbo society. By aesthetic standard I am referring to aesthetics as a branch of philosophy concerned with setting and defining the standards of beauty and taste; the role also involves helping to set, encode and thereby preserve communal values. The many mask types which appear in Igbo masking communities capture this and they also help to shape communal attitudes to beauty, ugliness, force, power, chastity, all those notions and ideas which were mentioned previously as underpinning the masking idea and types. One of the things that Igbo masking does very well as I have illustrated with my description of Akuezuozo is the fact that beauty and ugliness do not always correspond to pleasure and distaste respectively; there can be ugliness that is aligned to nobility as with Akuezuozo and on occasions, beauty associated with

emptiness. The point being made here is that notions of beauty, ugliness are culturally and contextually specific – as they are informed by and implicated in the values and thoughts of the community. Thus, what is perceived as beautiful in one context may in fact not be thought so in another, occasionally might actually be the opposite. Therefore, encapsulating the Igbo sense of aesthetics is a crucial role that the masquerade theatre performs for Igbo culture. It is precisely in this last role that Igbo masking can be seen to be crucial in the process of accumulation, collation and dissemination of Igbo culture and collective memory; the masks reaffirm and reinforce collectively held values and codes of conduct, of what is accepted as right or wrong, as well as what is perceived to be beautiful or ugly. The masks remind the spectators of the past, the present and sometimes, glimpses of the future; and no masquerade in Igboland does this as well as the magnificent *Ijele*.

In combination, however, these three functions enable the masquerade theatre to provide its greatest service to Igbo culture which is its capacity to be a reflexive mirror which the Igbo use to examine and make commentary on themselves and their neighbours – beginning with their belief system, social organisation and institutions, polity, moral codes and values, guides for individual and collective conduct; all are held up for affirmation, scrutiny and revision if necessary.

### **Dancing the Igbo World – The *Ijele* as Live and Mobile Memory and Archive**

Before going on to discuss the *Ijele* masquerade and its crucial role in documenting and memorialising Igbo culture and experience, it will be useful to highlight the fact that the act of documenting history and experience occurs also at the individual level of both performer and actor. This is because very often personalised characters and sketches are added to the communal repertoire to reflect individual as well as communal encounters and experiences of the Igbo world, the outside world, and especially the other – for instance, as with the white character during colonialism, there are also now characters from other ethnic groups in Nigeria, such as the Hausa kola nut seller mentioned earlier, or the outsider police sergeant or security officer. This accumulation and admission of individual histories and experiences is encouraged as a way of keeping the collective history and culture alive and actively growing.

I have always been fascinated by the *Ijele* masquerade ever since I saw one as a young child on the back of my paternal grand-mother at an Enemma Festival many years ago. I have seen so many other *Ijele* masquerades since, but I have developed a personal relationship with the *Ijele*

from my hometown, Nkpor in Idemili Local Government Area of Anambra State. I will therefore like to end the paper with a close look at the *Ijele*, because, for me, more than any other masquerade type in Igboland, it provides the perfect example of the various roles, which the masking theatre fulfils for Igbo people and culture. Watching an *Ijele* perform, in my view, is like watching the Igbo world in motion, hence the title for



Figure 2: *Ijele* Masquerade - Photograph by Muyiwa Osifuye (Date Unknown).

this section of the paper – ‘dancing the Igbo World’ or carrying the Igbo world on his head. The last *Ijele* I watched was from Unubi although the performance was at the funeral of a highly respected elder in Nkpor and it was in March 1994. What mattered was the contemporaneity that was evident; this was because that *Ijele* too was old and yet modern by virtue of what it carried on its frame – ancient history cohabiting with modern technology and recent events.

The *Ijele* is the best example of the masking theatre providing the Igbo with a mechanism and context for updating, referencing, dealing with and fixing experiences of and within the Igbo collective memory. Like the Igbo world that it represents, the *Ijele* refuses to be fixed or set, unlike other masquerades who once they are designed, made or carved, remain so for ever; *Ijele*, on the other hand, grows in content and complexity with age. This is because new objects, images and colours representing new experiences and encounters are added on to the mask frame – thus like the world it represents, it is constantly redefining itself as the years go by; it is different and new each time it appears. It retains all elements from the past, eclectically linking and accommodating past and present in one place and time. In the case of the Nkpor *Ijele* of my first experience, my earliest memories of seeing the masquerade was the khaki-clad and helmeted white colonial district officer of the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the big ship that brought colonialism; the colonial police officers, court messengers and interpreters of the same era, to re-diffusion sets (transistor radios), bicycles, motor-cycles, cars and aeroplanes of the thirties, forties, fifties and sixties colonised Eastern Nigeria. Another memorable encounter with this masquerade was in 1971, a year after the Biafra-Nigeria war which had ended in 1970 – this was memorable because there was a significant update on the mask to signify the momentous episode the war represented for the community in particular and Igboland as a whole. In this outing the mask grew with the addition of gun-toting soldiers (representing both the military interregnum that Nigeria went through from the mid-sixties and the civil war itself), helicopters, jet fighters and bombers, and with pride of place on the mask frame, a black and yellow image of the rising sun (Biafra’s national emblem), there to speak about what people felt or had in their minds about their recent history. This particular appearance was very remarkable for the town and its people as the objects and emblems of war had sought to etch this traumatic experience in the community’s collective memory – Nkpor had felt the full brunt of the war being consistently on the battle front between Biafran and Nigerian soldiers with the result that people suffered extreme hardships and heavy losses of family members. I then saw the *Ijele* inter-

mittently between 1990 and 2000 when I was researching indigenous performances of West Africa and was fortunate to return home every year during the Enemma Festival, usually in late-February to mid-March. Again, true to its form, the *Ijele* kept revising and growing to accommodate new things. There were latest fashion accessories (such as Nike, Adidas trademarks, and expensive watches) hoodies, new models of cars, telephone poles and wires, and handsets, television sets, cameras, computers and floppy discs, satellite dishes/masts, and by 2004, mobile phones and camcorders appeared. I am sure that laptops, flash-keys, headphones, will have found their way onto the *Ijele* canvass.

Adding on these new developments in technology and the experiences arising from them, the *Ijele* transforms itself into a mobile, dancing chronicle of Igbo individual and collective journeys and memories; it also is a semiotic indicator that these object and experiences have become part of the Igbo collective consciousness. Like other indigenous art forms in Africa, the *Ijele's* resilience lies in its ability to 'dialectically interact and negotiate with history ... constantly reviewing and revising [itself] in response to the ever-changing historical and cultural context' but also in the process engaging with, adapting and incorporating elements of history into its universe in what I describe as 'an irreverent postmodernist appropriation of alien material and threats in a process of discursive containment'. (Okagbue, 2001, p, 10) *Ijele* is often described, and rightly so, as the Igbo world in motion. Capturing and periodically presenting this visual mobile tapestry of Igbo experience acts as a reminder to the spectators of what terrains and historical moments Igbo culture has gone through. But it is ultimately a celebration of that history.

### **Conclusion: Contiguity, Negotiations and Continuity**

It is evident that masking is a central component of Igbo culture and life. There are as many mask characters as there are Igbo experiences – the masquerade theatre world encompasses all of Igbo experience, as it is a record, a form of memorialisation and embodiment of this experience. Masking exists in various forms all over Igboland, with different communities practising the art in their own ways; however, they are all united in the fact that they are believed to be spirits of dead ancestors or supernatural forces that are part of the Igbo universe, and in that respect, masking is a ritual cum secular activity that embodies the contiguous relationship between the various planes of the Igbo universe by enabling them to bring the spirits and ancestors into direct physical contact with humans in a mutually beneficial encounter – the humans get knowledge, answers and advice to questions and matters that affect their lives, while the sprits

are remembered, revered and feted. Masking supports the crossing of boundaries between the spiritual and material planes in order to facilitate interactions and negotiations between the two realms. What has been made clear is that three planes make up the Igbo universe – the planes of the living, the dead and the unborn. The living die to become ancestors; the unborn are born to become the living; the ancestors can become the unborn and return to the living as children; or they can be invited back periodically as masks. Igbo concept of life is that it is a continuous cycle – what is, has been and will be again. Masking is a part of this cyclic continuity of Igbo thought, of contiguity and continuity between the past, the present and the future.

Beyond this though, it is also clear that masking performs other essential functions for and in Igbo culture. First, it is religious and ritual as it enables the actualisation of Igbo religion as outlined above; second, masking has a socio-political role in society helping to shape and enforce morality as well as being an instrument for socialisation of young boys into roles and responsibilities; and finally, masking performs a crucial artistic role as it helps to set and test aesthetic values and practices while providing highly appreciated entertainment for the spectators.

On a final note, in spite of its manifest positive roles and contributions to Igbo life and culture, the paper recognises the fact that women are excluded from masking, and that while not being a concern that is being addressed at the moment is one that needs to be flagged up. The fact of this exclusion of women is not lost on this research as it is obvious that the masquerade theatre reflects the patriarchy of Igbo society in which women are marginalised, relegated to the private domain and denied access to the public space where important discourses take place. Every theatre, we have been told by Turner and Shevtsova, reveals so much about the society or culture out of which it originates and it is unfortunate that Igbo masking theatre seems to replicate and reaffirm the patriarchal nature of Igbo culture and society. The fact of women not being allowed to participate in this theatre as active agents means that they are excluded and denied a voice in the one single theatrical form that exists in Igboland; their right to speak back is denied while the men can answer back when they are attacked or criticised in the performances. The theatre is a public space and like in all other public spaces of Igbo culture women are reduced to passive onlookers. In this theatre, all the characters are performed by male actors, thus while we get a male perspective on a female character we do not get a female perspective on a male. It is surprising and unfortunate that Igbo women do not seem to be aware of this or perhaps they do not care.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented as a Keynote Lecture at the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual International Igbo Conference, *Memory, Culture & Community*, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London 21 April, 2018

## References

- Barthes, Roland (1967), 'The Death of the Author', *Image Music Text*, Transl. Stephen Heath, London, Fontana Press
- Igweonu, Kene and Okagbue, Osita (eds. 2013), Introduction, *Performative Interactions in African Theatre 3 – Making Space, Rethinking Drama and Theatre in Africa*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing
- Okagbue, Osita (1993), 'Invisible Presences: Masks and Spirits in Igbo Society', *ASSAPH C* No 9
- Okagbue, Osita (1997), 'When the Dead Return: Play and Seriousness in African Masked Performances', *SATJ (South African Theatre Journal)*, Volume 11 No 1 & 2
- Okagbue, Osita (2007), *African Theatres and Performances*, London & New York: Routledge
- Okagbue, Osita (2007), 'Through Other Eyes and Voices: Women in Koteba and Mmanwu Performances', *African Performance Review*, Vol. 1 Nos 2 & 3
- Shevtsova, Maria (1993), *Theatre and Cultural Interaction*, Sydney, Australia: Sydney Association for Studies in Culture and Society, University of Sydney.
- Soyinka, Wole (1973, 1993), 'The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy', *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*, London: Methuen
- Soyinka, Wole (1976), *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Turner, Victor (1980) quoted by Schechner, Richard and Appel, Willa (1990), Introduction, *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press