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Legislative Gossip as Theatre: Odeli and Abule of Ibaji of East-central Nigeria[9]

Ameh Dennis Akoh
Osun State University, Nigeria

Abstract

This essay employs the idea of the traditionally known masquerades and the concept of facekuerade (Ododo, 2008) to advance the concept of legislative gossip as gossip that is backed by traditional law. However, while Sunday Ododo engages with the non-masked masquerade (facekuerade), this paper looks at both the masked and non-masked masquerades that ritually perform the functions of social and spiritual cleansing in their performative modes. While *odeli* the masked masquerade is attached specifically to the Eka festival, which is an annual festival among the Ibaji, *abule* is a maskless masquerade generally referred to as *egwu-odu* (night masquerade). This paper discusses the interface of these two masquerade cultures as reflective of the dimensions of cultural transformation of governance among the people in contemporary times. The methodology employed is purely participatory observation of an initiate into the Ibaji masquerade culture. Building on Richard Bauman (1984), Victor Turner (1982, 1988) and Richard Schechner (2004), the aim is to fully understand the masquerade culture and its symbols as well as its approach to narrative, ritual and ceremonial forms of verbal behaviour in different sociocultural settings. The conclusion is that this form of masquerade culture as theatre among the Ibaji people is a form of cultural expression and communal action even in their changing forms.

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Introduction: Masquerades as Incarnate Beings

Masquerades are generally believed to be incarnations of spirits of the dead members of the society. According to Eboigbe and Nwanna (2009: 210), "the departed members, appropriately transfigured, normally return on festival, ritual occasions or during social crises". Masquerades are generally associated with masks and masking; however, the word in many cultures is not just associated with masks alone. The primary essence is their divinity as beings incarnating from the dead into the world of the living. Because of its incarnate nature, the features of the masquerade are not limited by "physical, sensual manifestations" (Okoye, 1999: 68). It is for this reason that they are also called incarnate beings.

Ododo outlines a host of unmasked or maskless masquerades from various ethnic and sub-ethnic groups of Nigeria like *Oloolu* Ibadan in Oyo State, *Jenju* of Abeokuta in Ogun State, *Okelekele* masquerade of Ekinrin-Ade in Kogi State; *Melemuku* masquerade of Oyo town and *Atupa* of Ilora in Oyo State; *Olukotun* masquerade of Ede, *Komenle* of Agba and *Akereburu* of Owu in Osun State (Ododo, 2008: 285-86). Okoye describes the performance of a maskless masquerade in Igbo culture:

> Ayaka, like other night masquerades, does not wear regular costumes to disguise performers, as this is not necessary. Speaking, chanting and singing in a disguised Ududo (spider) voice, under the mask of the darkness is more than enough disguise since only the initiated come out to watch and follow Ayaka (1999: 95-6).

The above description finds similarity in *abule*, one of the focus incarnate beings discussed in this essay. The aim of this essay is to reveal the theatrical in the performance of the two masquerade acts of *abule* and *odeli*. The essay will use the word masquerade interchangeably with incarnate being.

Ibaji Cultural Milieu

Ibaji, largely an agrarian society, is a subgroup of the Igala of central Nigeria. It occupies a total area of 1,377km^2 and is bounded in the north by Idah and in the south by the Igala-speaking peoples of Anambra, Enugu, Delta and Edo states, the last two only separated by the River Niger. The masquerade culture of the Ibaji is more closely related to the Igbo than the larger Igala masquerade tradition. This is evident in the fact that many of the masquerade songs are either completely in Igbo or a mixture of Igbo and the Ibaji dialect of Igala.

The foregoing may be the reason why there are conflicting traditions of origins of the incarnate beings in Igala (Picton, 1977; Kasfir, 1979; Adepegba, 1981; Nzekwu, 1983; Ugonna, 1984; Enekwe, 1987; Nwabueze, 2011; and Miachi, 2012). The Igala refer to masquerades as *egwu* although in the Ibaji-Igala culture, the Igbo *mmonwu* or *mmanwu* is also known as *egwu*. The home of the *egwu* is severally called *oda;* just like the Awka Igbo, the Igala *egwu* masquerade's home is called *oda*. The *oda* can either be in one secluded part of the town or 'a strongly built house belonging to a staunch member of the mmonwu group […] or an enclosure strongly fenced or walled round, inside which all the secret transactions about mmonwu are carried out'. (Ugonna, 1983: 50) Ugonna refers to the dwelling place (*oda* or *ekwuru*) as both a physical and sociological setting. The masquerades are seen as incarnation of the dead/ancestors and the reverence, which Ibaji people have for incarnate beings, is a result of their belief "in the existence of the Supreme Being as well as the ancestors. They pay great homage to *ibegwu* – ancestral spirits" (Akoh, 2006: 10). The behaviour of the incarnate being among the Ibaji, like those among the Igbo, is 'structured in such a manner as to depict the patterns of behaviour' within society. This is why "the masquerade hides behind ancestral representation and, throughout the period of the drama, is seen as an ancestor and given all the privileges of an ancestor" (Nwabueze, 2011: 116). This justifies the general Igala veneration of ancestors and why they have the final say in all matters. As J.S. Boston states:

> The Igala tend to validate knowledge in general by saying that it comes from the past, and their way of saying that a fact belongs to the widest order of human experience is to say that it was known to the ancestors of long ago, *abogujo igbili* (1968: 6).

All incarnate beings in Ibaji belong to the individual *onu* (king) of each village whether such a being is performed by an age group or clan; no incarnate being performs without the permission of the *onu*. This is why certain cultural conditions must be fulfilled before the appearance of any masquerade in any village. Thus, the uninitiated maintain a reasonable distance from a masquerade and any violation of this rule is usually met with immediate reprimand by human handlers. This writer witnessed a strange scene in the 1970s when members of a Christian church grabbed and unmasked an incarnate being for supposedly trespassing on church premises. Those found guilty of committing this abomination against the divine were fined by the *onu*; some died of mysterious illnesses while others became deformed.

The Idea of Gossip and Theatre

In relating anthropology to culture and theatre, Johannes Fabian states that "the significance of theatre in multicultural situations would seem to depend on the theatricality of the culture" (2007: 210). This suggests that theatricality or performativity can be culturally induced. Gossip is conversation about other people which is usually done without their consent. In Ibaji, gossip or rumour is called *olo* as opposed to *ola* (talk) or *oluka* (conversation). Akoh writes that there are two aspects of gossip among the Ibaji – the positive and the negative.

> Generally, in the Ibaji society, the act of gossiping performs the positive function of information dissemination as well as revealer of secrets of evil deeds. It is […] for this reason that the people have the *Odeli* masquerade and *Abule* (night spirit) whose roles (as revealers of secrets) are complemented by the human factors (Akoh, 2006: 166).

Among the Ibaji, *olo* can be carried out under the cover of darkness or a mask or away from the subject of the *olo*, in which case the voice of the *aro-olo* (the gossip) is heard but his/her person is not seen. The *olo* that is acted by both *abule* and *odeli* is deliberate and bold. Thus, this act is legislative because the gossip is backed by the traditional law which binds everyone. It is not perceived as a form of retaliation carried out by someone who has been aggrieved. In their incarnate state, the masquerades, both under the cover of mask or night, and with the authority of deity, do perform inhuman actions as evidenced by the performance of *abule* during the *Eka* festival. The *Eka* festival is a five-day communal performance event that showcases the major masquerades of the Ibaji people and the performance varies from five to nine days across the communities; but irrespective of the number of days, the performance culture is similar.

The performative value of the *olo* or gossip in this context has both entertainment and social control qualities. As Berger asserts, o*lo* as used by the Ibaji has sociological values.

> Ridicule and gossip are potent instruments of social control in primary groups of all sorts. Many societies use ridicule as one of the main controls…. In such communities gossip is one of the principal channels of communication, essential for the maintenance of the social fabric (1963: 88).

Among the Ibaji-Igala, *abule* is an exclusively nocturnal incarnate being. Included among incarnate beings referred to as *egwu-odu* (night

masquerades or spirits) are: *Ichato; odogwu; oti-ekwe*, also regarded as *egwu-abogwujo* (masquerades for the elders); and *abule*. *Abule* ritual performance is aimed at cleansing the land defiled by witchcraft, laziness, theft, and immorality, in particular, adultery. Its performance is therefore not tied to any specific occasion even though it is compulsory that on the eve of the *Eka* festival, *abule* maskless characters perform as part of the cleansing process for a peaceful celebration. *Abule* performs to cleanse the land in preparation for the visit of other incarnate beings to the festival. (See Miachi, 2012: 155; 261-262) While a*bule* is usually a group of maskless masquerades widely known as night spirits, there is no restriction on the number of *abule* that can perform at a given time. As night spirits, *abule* are not seen by people in the human community. To the community, a*bule* is regarded as the eagle on the iroko tree that sees and hears all but is always patient to give the offending member of the human community time to repent before its appearance. While it is true in some cases that in carrying out its social function *abule* is "kept by the pondside (sic) from the early hours of the morning till dusk", as claimed by Miachi (2011: 311), its sphere of performance and influence is not restricted to this setting alone. Indeed, there are other forms of masquerades that undertake this aspect of discipline called *egwu-itale* (masquerade that flogs). These are usually fully masked masquerades that guard public utilities and perform other functions as dictated by the *onu*.

Generally, women and children constitute the unseen audience of the *abule* performance who listen behind closed doors. As Ododo (2010: 210; 2008: 289) states, "the facekuerade essence is essentially projected by all the participating 'masquerade' characters without masks. The awe and mysticism that surround these unmasked beings as masquerades are the distinguishing elements of the piercing sound" accentuated, in this instance, by the *afu*, which is a stringed instrument; a flat portable wood is tied to a rope that produces a piercing sound or noise. It is used to herald the commencement of the *abule* performance and it accompanies the performance intermittently to produce the right (performance) atmosphere. Ododo however argues for a rethink on the use of the word masquerade, which originally referred to masked performers or spirits. According to him, 'the concepts of mask in masquerading art transcends the physical object of concealment. Night (darkness), voice disguise, pseudonyms and fear have become potent masking factors that sometimes de-emphasise the use of proper mask, the root word for masquerades.' For this reason, he prefers to call this category of masquerades 'facekuerade' or 'facekuerade' characters. (2008: 286).

Otherworldly sounds produced by *afu* herald and set the mood for the performance. The moment the *afu* sound is heard all uninitiated

human persons run into their homes and lock their doors for, as earlier stated, they must not behold the *abule* performers. This is followed by sounds made by the incarnate characters calling on one another in a repeated call and response style as they move from one end of the village to another, visiting the houses of offenders on their unseen list.

Call: *Odumaka ee!*
Response: *Eeee*

Each offending member of the community is taken and ridiculed for an offence whether people are aware of it or not, or have forgotten as a result of the passage of time. Some are castigated while others are both exposed and punished. While the exposition is done only in the hearing of people behind closed doors they are punished in open daylight. Since it is assumed that members of the community would have heard of the offence through the performance of *abule*, the punishment in the open will not be strange to them. The performance is punctuated intermittently by usually a sexually explicit song:

Udo udo udo kanga (Clitoris clitoris clitoris *kanga*) (repeated many times)

The word *kanga* in Igala or Ibaji is onomatopoeic of something that is sharp and standing like the female clitoris. *Abule* has this liberty to sing such sexually explicit songs that ordinary human beings are not permitted to. One interesting aspect of the performance is that even though their ridicule may be scathing, once they visit the house of an offender the incarnate beings first greet their unwilling host and ask about his/her health; afterwards, they announce the purpose of their visit. Throughout the performance, they stand either in front of the door of the house or by the window.

Odeli is a social incarnate being whose performance is not as deeply formalised as the *abule*; in fact, it is interactive in its performance. Among the Ibaji, and especially in Iyano village, *odeli* is a group of three masked incarnate beings representing the three clans that constitute the village. The *odeli* perform only during the annual *Eka* festival. The performance is carried out from morning to evening and will always stop at nightfall. The three masked beings emerge from one end of the village, usually from an *oda*. There are usually two *oda* strategically placed at the two ends of the village. These *oda* are however temporary, used especially for the *Eka* festival and thereafter dismantled. The incarnate beings all return to the permanent *oda* of the individual families and clans for 'rest'. In most cases, these *oda* are built in the royal palace of the family or clan

head. In fact, individual persons can own an *oda* where the incarnate beings and their paraphernalia take their 'rest'.

As soon as they emerge unannounced, a group of young male volunteers joins and follows them singing the chorus.

Lead: *Ekwukwu odeli*
Chorus: *Okpabele kpabele*
Lead: *Odeli dabu oloko*
Chorus: *Okpabele kpabele*
Lead: The noise of odeli
Chorus: *Okpabele kpabele*
Lead: Odeli is like uloko (weaver bird)
Chorus: *Okpabele kpabele*

The *odeli* characters themselves refer to their performance (songs and dialogue) as 'noise'; the kind of noise that one cannot push aside. The Chorus' lyrics, '*okpabele kpabele*' suggest behaviour similar to that of a leech when it attaches itself to its victim's body. Thus, just as removing a leech leaves the victim bleeding, *odeli* usually leave the audience with long-lasting impact. Indeed, they are invariably telling their audience, "You cannot do without our noise". This is further accentuated by the use of the metaphor, "*odeli dabu uloko.*" *Uloko* is a common bird in Ibaji which every rice farmer struggles to keep off the rice plantation during the harvest season because the swarming tactics of the birds. Therefore, like *uloko*, *odeli* masquerades will not leave the stage until nightfall.

Like the *abule*, *odeli* can engage their host in a fairly long dialogue so as to establish some camaraderie before outlining the purpose of their visit. Their performance is less formally organised than *abule*. Thus, even when they casually encounter people on their way, they can stop, call them by name and strike a conversation. *Odeli* may accept some gifts especially from those members of the community who are innocent. In such instances, *odeli* will merely stop, greet, crack jokes, and move on. When *odeli* arrive at the palace of a family/clan head, they must stop, greet the residents and stage a performance. In this context, their language is more poetic because the family/clan head is believed to be a representative of the gods or ancestors on earth, so, he would understand the coded language. The masked actor's use of traditional motifs and symbols helps him to enrich his narrative which "is not merely ornamental but is carefully structured to yield meaning" (Nwabueze, 2011: 125). There appears, therefore, to be this similarity of form and language of the incarnate being in traditional cultures even though the narrative patterns may still differ based on the world view of the people.

The interaction between incarnate beings and the people is regarded as an interaction that bridges the human world with "spatial realities"; it "animates virtual worlds and virtual people (characters) in theatrical creation and this transforms them into compelling verisimilitude in reality" (Ododo, 2008:303).

The Idea of Mask and the Dramatic Character of Incarnate Beings (Masquerades)

Masquerade or masquerading is an intrinsic aspect of the culture of the Ibaji-Igala. Nzekwu (1981: 134) agrees with this notion when he asserts that the Igala are responsible for the importation of this culture to the Igbo. Whatever the argument or position, one inescapable fact is that the mask plays a communicative role in the masquerade culture of every people. Picton's essay, "What's in a Mask" (1990: 181-202), explores the question and relationship of mask and identity in a cultural setting, particularly "the role of the mask in mediating the relationship between the performer and his identity in performance" and "what happens when someone puts on a mask" (1990: 181). The idea and function of the mask among the Ibaji-igala is not just to hide the identity of the masked figure, but it is used to underline the fact that the masquerade is a spirit and cannot be seen except in its masked form. The Ibaji believe that there is a spirit being behind every mask. Okoye argues that:

> All African traditions recommend that masquerades be perceived as supernatural beings that are guests of the living from the extra-mundane universe. They discourage the perception of them as representations by actors wearing costumes and masks; rather, the costumed actors are regulated as the spirits themselves, respected by the community appropriately as befits their spiritual characters (1999: 71).

Like the Yoruba (Ogundeji, 2000: 4), the commonest form of ritual festival displays among the Ibaji-Igala is masquerading. Both its act and secrets are the exclusive preserve of men, and initiates at that (Nzekwu, 1981: 132). For the *abule*, its performance is shrouded in both the darkness of night and the awe created by the mysterious voice. It is not the physical mask of the *abule* that awes the audience but the eerie atmosphere created by the *afu*, which is similar only to that created during the performance of *egwu-abogwujo* (*ichato*, *odogwu* and *otiekwe*).

However, the *odeli* is a more temperate and congenial type even though the satirical gossips also touch every aspect of society and humanity. Yet children and women watch the itinerant masquerades from a

distance, "admiring the beauty of his costume and performance. They know that masquerades are men dressed up in strange costumes; yet they are forbidden to tell of this or discuss it" (Nzekwu, 1981:132; Ododo, 2010:210). In their divine community role, the art of *abule* and *odeli* has been described to be similar in context to the town crier who serves as a mass media and public relations officer in the traditional society (Akoh, 2006: 3). Just as the playwright creates his characters in the literary drama/theatre, the character of the masquerade art is created by the cosmic environment of the people that own, maintain and cherish its tradition. These characters may be extraordinary beings who, remain at the outer limits of human behaviour (Wilson, 2004: 289; cf. Enekwe, 1987: 57). Wilson, in describing the extraordinary nature of the characters of the masquerade art states:

> In one sense, the mask is an extension of the performer – a face on top of a face. There are several ways to look at masks. They remind us, first of all, that we are in a theatre, that the act going on before our eyes is not real in a literal sense but is a symbolic or an artistic representation… Masks offer other symbolic possibilities (2004: 380).

Nwabueze (2011: 116) has argued that because of the extramundane nature of their origin and existence it will be erroneous to assign these incarnate beings the kind of 'conventionalized dialogue' seen in formal drama. Therefore, their communication with the living is appropriately dictated by the otherworldly display of dialogue that is decorated with proverbs and aphorisms. These help to create the needed awe of these visitors to the human community from their audience.

Performativity and the Audience

The *appreciation* of a performance in whatever manner justifies its performativity; as Okpewho states, "the significance of audience-oriented studies like Basgoz's is that they are squarely within the territory of aestheticist inquiry" (1990: 5). This is true especially when one considers the social context of performance or what Richard Bauman calls 'anthropology of performance'. (1977: 13) In his study of oral performance, Okpewho identifies four 'significant issues', namely, event, act, role and genre that are important in the exploration *odeli* and *abule* performances.

As evidenced in *odeli* and *abule* performances, the participation of the audience, in most cases, determines the aesthetic factors involved. *Abule* has a limited and an unseen audience participation; even though women and children may peep from their rooms in an attempt to catch a glimpse

of the incarnate beings, this must not be known by the performers or elders. Unlike the *ekuechi* performances of the Ebira of Kogi State, Nigeria, where "strong women are there only you don't see them… so likewise are the dead" (Picton, 1990: 75, cited in Ododo, 2008: 306), in *abule*, those behind locked doors in various homes are mostly awake monitoring the performance from within. These people constitute a form of audience too (Ododo, 2008: 306). This may be responsible for Dasylva's classificatory paradigm of oral performance in its "imaginative use of language and response-reception in actual performance" (1999: 6). Thus, even though the audience of the *abule* or *odeli* may not gather in a designated place as the *egwu'ra*, *epere*, *ijomilijo,* their performances are largely verbal and open-ended as oral literature because of their "generic fluidity as well as …(their) structural and thematic mobility" (6). However, unlike Ododo's (2008: 286) facekuerade performer who encounters his audience face-to-face, the real audience of *abule* do not see the performance: they only hear and only the followers see the performance. In the case of *abule*, its performativity is further enhanced by the accompanying ancestral sound produced by the *afu* and the *presence* of unseen audience. Additionally, like the "facekuerade," the performance concept is linked to the divine essence of the Ibaji world. The world is ruled by the hierarchical order of ancestral beings. Thus, the principle of the divine in performance:

> [S]uggests an integrated concept of the performing arts while giving further credence to the well-established 'dome of continuity' that links the worlds of the living, the dead and the unborn. It is therefore justifiable to assume that the African cosmic globe has the capacity to connect the physical and the non-physical, the mundane and the spiritual. (Ododo, 2008: 303)

Even with the scathing satire of the songs, the interactive nature of the *odeli* performance satisfies the play and social process nexus espoused in Schechner's earlier works, which coalesced in *Performance Theory* (1988). Beyond their corrective cleansing purpose, the 'gossip' has its entertainment value to the audience especially for those members who are not adversely affected by the scathing criticism. For instance, the songs and dialogues of *odeli* which the three masked characters call *ekwukwu* (noise) are rendered in a manner that draws positive attention. This is the reason for which their host at any time welcomes them even when he knows that they might utter some unsavoury statements. These incarnate beings serve as memory for their societies and as creative artists, their entertainment value found in the songs and camaraderie all colour the utilitarian essence of the entire performance. These performances form part of

the social lore of interference with life, of social control mechanism that is regular practice in traditional societies (Turner, 1982). The anthropology of the largely verbal performance of *abule* and *odeli* draws on the close link between theatre, sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, folklore studies and semiotics. They both, in their performance provide the outside with the Ibaji worldview and response to 'narrative, ritual, and ceremonial forms of verbal behaviour in different sociocultural settings'. In their performative modes, the two socio-ritual acts as theatre "articulate the spiritual, social, economic, political and psychological needs and fears of a people through performance" (Ogundeji, 2000: 2). Therefore, the legislative act of gossip is both corrective and purgative.

Conclusion

The foregoing is an attempt to explore two performance traditions with singular utilitarian value. Both are built around the idea of mask and maskless masquerades or incarnate beings, even though I have noted that the fact of the absence of physical mask or masking is symbolically filled with the darkness on one hand. On the other hand, the distinction between masked and maskless 'masquerade' is removed by the basic fact of their being referred generally to as incarnate beings. Their performative nature or performance aesthetics draw us into the conclusion that they are theatre in a general sense than the narrow categorisation of western critics or anthropologists. Thus, in this essay, I have attempted to theorize around the utilitarian as well entertainment value of gossip as both performance and theatre drawn from a performance tradition of Ibaji of East-central Nigeria. It is built around the general concept that the incarnate beings serve as both guests of the human community and as social control any time their presence is required. Accordingly, the incarnate beings in Ibaji operate both at the spiritual and the mundane levels and they serve, to the people, as a form of cultural expression and communal action even in their changing forms.

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