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## The Rhetoric of Ajofia Masquerade as an Appendage of the Igbo Folklore

By

**Corresponding author: Uche Nnyagu (PhD)**

Department of English Language and Literature Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka.

**Abstract:** Masquerades are highly venerated in parts of West Africa, especially in Igbo of southern Nigeria because of their immense importance to the society. Different aspects of masquerades exist in Africa and each of the masquerades has characteristic features and the roles they play in the society. Masquerades had in the precolonial era, existed in the traditional African society for the purpose of entertaining the audience and for societal reformation. In the contemporary era where western civilisation has become the order of the day, African adherents of the western religion who abhor this indispensable aspect of the African folklore preach for its extinction. Attempts by the colonial masters to extinct masquerading have profusely proved abortive as masquerading had before colonisation, been an integral aspect of the African folklore and cannot easily be annihilated in the society. Many varieties of masquerades exist particularly in Igbo and Africa in general. Many of the masquerades are beautiful, others ugly. In all, masquerades perform varied functions in the African society. The origin of masquerading in society, Igbo in particular and Africa in general, is a mystery not meant to be demystified. In the society, the uninitiated are meant to go with the impression that masquerades emanate from ant holes when certain rituals are performed by the elders. Among the many types of masquerades in Igbo, Ajofia is seen as one of the most mysterious. This paper does not aim to attempt demystifying masquerades; it is an attempt to analyse the songs of Ajofia in line with the Igbo folklore.

**Keywords:** Ajofia, Masquerading, Folklore, Chants, Colonialism

### INTRODUCTION

According to Uche Nnyagu and Ngozi Adunchezor, in their "Satiric Chants of Atumma as a Veritable Means of Social Reformation", Masquerading is part of the tradition of the Igbo. They quote G. T. Basden in his *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, as saying that "The ceremony of making "maw" (juju) prevails throughout the Ibo country (116b). Ajofia masquerade of Nnewi is one of the most mysterious masquerades in Igbo. The term, Ajofia is literally translated to English as Evil forest. Before colonization of the Igbo by the

Europeans, every society in Igbo had a place where they cast bodies of the people believed to be evil. The so called evil people included twins, children who cut upper teeth first, people with some kinds of unfathomable ailments, those who committed suicide among others. Sometimes, depending on the level of crime, living persons had their hands and legs tied and thrown into the forest. The forest where such people were thrown into was known as the evil forest. The evil forest is dreaded because of the belief that spirits of those thrown into the forest would torment

whoever that came close to the forest. The masquerade, Ajofia is as dreadful as the historical evil forest. Wikipedia.org, disclosed that the name Ajofia means evil forest and this shows how mysterious and dreadful the masquerade is. According to the report, Ajofia is the most respected and feared masquerade. The masquerade is about 10 feet tall, the dreadful things expected to be seen in the evil forest such as many dead animals, live animals and crawling insects are found on the body of the masquerade. In addition, smoke ooze from the head of the masquerade and the masquerade holds a traditional symbol of “anunu ebe.” Anunu Ebe is a mysterious tree in Igbo, dreaded as no bird perches on it and no plant grows around it. One of the men who follows the masquerade carries a big box wrapped with red cotton. According to one elder from Otollo Nnewi who pleaded anonymity, “Ajofia is a big masquerade with great respect for his fame. It is a masquerade that every average Nnewi person should be proud of. It has got many of our youths engaged as nothing less than fifty men follow the masquerade wherever he goes. The multitude of people that follow the masquerade are of course, paid.” Confirming this, an Internet report disclosed that there is probably no masquerade in Igbo land that goes out with more retinue of young youths than the Evil Forest. The report quantified that the average number of young blooded youths that accompany Ajofia to an event is forty. The maximum number is one hundred to one hundred and fifty. According to the report, “What many people may not know is that all these boys down to the least of them are paid. This means that Ajofia masquerade is a business company, a performance troupe.”

The internet report vivifies that the reason why the cost for inviting Ajofia to an event is abysmally very high is because majority of the money goes to the big truck that the leader of the cult, Chief Azuka Micheal Efoagui hires which all the boys must go with to the place of the event. As the Internet report discloses, Chief Efoagui is quoted as saying that the glory of Ajofia Masquerade lies in the crowd the mask steps into an event with. The crowd, Chief Efoagui calls Mba. *Mba* in Igbo which denotes a nation. To him, Ajofia masquerade is a nation

thus it must be accompanied into an event by an intimidating number able to make a nation.

### Functions of Masquerades in Igbo Society

According to Alex Asigbo in his “Transmutation in Masquerade Costumes and Performance: an Examination of Abuja Carnival 2010, Masquerades perform specific functions in the day to day existence of people who understand its significance hence the veneration and high esteem accorded it as physical manifestations of the spirit world. In Chapter ten of his *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe vividly illustrates the functions of masquerades in Igbo society. From the novel, we understand that masquerades, Egwugwu function as the judiciary whose aim include to settle disputes between and among members of the society. The nine Egwugwu represent their ancestors come out when there is a serious case, family or communal case that needed to be settled. The case of marital issue involving domestic violence was brought before the Egwugwu. Uzowulu engages in incessant beating of his wife which results in Mgbafo’s family members taking their daughter from him. According to the novel, Uzowulu was a mean man that he could not hear from anyone else except Egwugwu. The nine Egwugwu converge like in the modern court to hear the case. After listening, the nine retire of them retired to their chamber to deliberate on the case they had listened to each of the persons concerned. After which, Ajofia, the Evil Forest, who happens to be the judge comes out to give the judgment. The case is judiciously settled as the Evil Forest mandates Uzowulu to take Palmwine and go to his in-laws and beg his wife to come back with a promise never to beat her again. The masquerade equally asks Odukwe, Mgbafo’s brother to accept him when he comes and everyone becomes happy. After the case of Uzowulu, another case involving ownership of property was brought up for hearing.

According to Laurence Perrine, literature entertains and educates. What this implies is that anything that fails to entertain and educate should not in anyway, be regarded as literature. Perrine describes it as a miniature golf or ping-pong, the literature that only entertains without educating and according to him, such does not deserve giving any attention. In the same vein, Bernard

Shaw is quoted in Patrick Murray's *Literary Criticism: a Glossary of Major Terms* as saying "... but unless comedy touches me as well as amuses me, it leaves me with a sense of having wasted my evening" (30). Shaw, according to Murray, 'found fault with Wilde's play because it did little more than cause successive waves of laughter to engulf the theatre' (30). As an aspect of literature, masquerades do not only educate, they as well entertain. By performing the function of judiciary as epitomised by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, we understand how masquerades educate. Besides, many masquerades like Atumma and Ajofia among others, sing satiric songs deriding ills and the perpetuators with the aim to correct impressions. According to Nnyagu and Adunchezor, in 'The Satiric Chants of Atumma as a Veritable Means of Social Reformation', 'most of the chants of Atumma Ugonabo are satires criticizing the ills going on in the society. Atumma Ugonabo believes that unless a particular ill is unveiled, it would continue. That is why he has decided to incorporate satire in his chants' (116). Masquerades do not just come to educate, part of their primary objective is to entertain. This is why whenever a masquerade appears on stage, people follow the masquerade because it entertains them. During the annual *Ipia Agba* Enugwu Ukwu, masquerades converge at the Civic Centre, Enugwu Ukwu where multitude of people had seated waiting for the masquerades to start entertaining them. According to Mr Chimezie Okoye, one of the organisers of the annual festival, 'People come from far and near to get themselves entertained.' Mr Okoye disclosed that even Nigerians based abroad come with their white friends to watch the masquerade performance. Many masquerades dance on stage, others sing while many others perform different feats to the cheering of the teaming audience. According to Professor Onwudiwe, a native of Nnewi, Ajofia entertains people with his songs and he equally educates with the songs. That is why wealthy people spend very high to hire Ajofia to perform in their occasions. Another indigene of Nnewi disclosed to the researcher in an oral interview that the price for hiring Ajofia is about one million naira. Inquisitively, the researcher aims to ascertain why it costs so high

and the response from the interviewee is that the knowledge and entertainment that the masquerade would give, coupled with the fame it would give whoever that invited him cost more than one million naira.

### Theoretical Framework

The researchers believe that ethnographic theory is the most appropriate theoretical framework for the study. Ethnography is a type of qualitative research that involves the researcher immersing himself or herself in a particular society in order to observe the entire way of life of the society. Bronislaw Malinowski is believed to be the father of the ethnographic theory. Malinowski, born in Poland in 1884, worked as a cultural anthropologist and developed his method or research through his early studies of Australian Aborigines and the people of Papua New Guinea and Melanesia during the 1910s. As the Igbo has it that he who stays closer to another perceives the smell of the person's mouth, Malinowski's method of research is participatory approach; he stayed in the societies he was studying as to observe and master the culture of the society. Wikipedia.org disclosed that apart from participation, interview is equally an essential tool in ethnographic study. The researcher in an ethnographic work, is interested in what is available, what is normal, what it is that people do, what they say, and how they work. The researcher gets these information either by staying with the people and participating in their cultures or by interviewing the people of the society. Fiction writers, especially historical writers, carry out research on the culture of the society that they want to write about so that they do not write what belies the culture of the society that they aim to mirror.

The researchers in the present work, understood that masquerading is an indispensable aspect of the Igbo culture and as Ajofia masquerade is of Nnewi origin, they decided that while they interviewed the people of Nnewi, they, at least, the male researcher devoted time to immerse himself by going out to observe Ajofia life as he performed on the stage. In many occasions when the masquerade, Ajofia performed, the male researcher was there to observe the performance live. The physical presence of the researcher

availed him the opportunity to understand much about the heroic masquerade.

### **Ajofia and the other Masquerades in Igbo Society**

As already noted earlier in this paper, masquerades are valued in Igbo. In Igbo, many different masquerades exist. Many are classified as masculine masquerades while others are feminine. That certain masquerades are seen as feminine does not in any way, entail that women participate in the masquerade cults. No, the masquerades are so called because they appear in form of women, solely to entertain people by dancing to the rhythm of the beating of the drummers. Of all the masquerades in Igbo, many have certain unique semblance. For instance, many masculine masquerades such as Okwomma, Agaba, Nkobo, Otawalikpo and even Izaga always clutch matchets to denote warrior. These masquerades are dreaded not only because their faces terrify but because they are filled with certain degree of vigour. According to Nnabugwu, a traditionalist from Umuenu Village Umuawulu, "Masculine masquerades clutch matchets to denote warrior. In Igbo, able bodied men are warriors and they are industrious farmers of yam. Masculine masquerades, are therefore, expected to demonstrate the virtue in order not to contradict what they represent." Explaining further, he said that every masquerade is designed for a purpose. Why the masquerade entertains the audience, the purpose has to be met. He made it vivid that part of the purpose is to symbolise what it is meant to symbolize. Mazi Nnabugwu gave examples of some masquerades in Igbo including Ijele masquerade.

The ijele masquerade, according to UNESCO, is the biggest masquerades in the Sub-Saharan Africa. Each of the masquerades in Igbo among other functions, entertain people. This is the primary objective of masquerades. Adamma masquerades entertain people by dancing to the beats of the drummers, likewise the masculine masquerades earlier mentioned, masquerades in the form of animals and of course, Ijele, the biggest masquerade. Ijele, despite his huge size, dances so wonderfully, exhibiting incredible feats. When ijele masquerade dances and turns around, the impression on the spectators is that he

would fall but he never does. Ajofia is huge but not to be compared to ijele.

Atumma masquerade dance and sing. Ajofia is basically known for his peculiar way of singing. His is more of interior monologue. He incorporates profuse proverbs in his songs in such a way that only the sage understands the underlying messages he passes across in his song. His voice is solid, very coherent like that of a normal human being. As his name denotes, Ajofia is terrifying, huge and tall, black like the imaginary Satan. On his head, different creatures assumed to be found only in evil forest are seen and thick smelly smoke emits from his head. He clutches the hand of a mysterious bird in his right hand and does not move fast. Despite his terrifying nature, wealthy persons pay huge amounts of money to invite the masquerade to perform on their occasions and teaming people come to watch the masquerade. Obviously, there are many different types of masquerades in Igbo and the advantages of masquerades in Igbo society are numerous and overwhelming.

### **Ajofia masquerade as an Aspect of the Igbo Folklore**

Margaret Drabble and Jenny Stringer, in their *Oxford Concise Companion to English Literature*, describe folklore as "the traditional beliefs, legends, and customs current among the common people; and the study of them" (235). Similarly, Chris Baldick in his *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, sees folklore as a modern term for the body of traditional customs, superstitions, stories, dances, and songs that have been adopted and maintained within a given community by processes of repetition not reliant on the written words (99). From the foregoing, we surmise that folklore is traditional, peculiar to a particular society. Baldick clarifies that folklore includes folksongs and folktales which he sees as broad category. According to him, "... this broad category of cultural forms embraces all kinds of \*legends, \*riddles, jokes, \*proverbs, games, charms, omens, spells, and rituals, especially those of pre-literate societies or social class" (99). Masquerades in the likes of Ajofia, had existed in the preliterate Igbo Society. As had already stated earlier, before the coming of the white man, the entire Igbo society were gregarious, almost having similar traditions which masquerade was



an indispensable aspect. G. T. Basden in *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, confirmed this fact when he writes that the ceremony of “maw” (juju) prevails throughout the Ibo country. This is a research made by Basden before the colonization of the Igbo. This goes to consolidate the fact that the masquerading had been a tradition in Igbo land in general. In Nnewi metropolis, Ajofia is a verity of masquerade venerated as part of folklore in that part of the Igbo society.

Those from Nnewi who were interviewed made it clear that nothing about Ajofia, its origin and the trajectory was documented in any written form. One major feature of folklore is its ability to survive in a society despite not being written down. In the entire Igbo society, nothing about masquerades in general is written down, but then the importance of masquerades is not esoteric to the people. Till today, young ones in any Igbo society anticipate with euphoria, the coming of any customary festival where masquerades would perform so that they could be entertained. That masquerades entertain and educate, vivifies the fact that masquerading is an indispensable aspect of literature. Many parents in far away Igbo societies usually take their children to their villages during certain traditional festivals so that they get entertained by masquerades. To Perrine, good literature is the one that has dual responsibilities; to entertain and to educate. Ajofia qualifies in this regard; Ajofia entertains with his melodious songs which are highly didactic.

In the view of Perrine, good literature, (including folklore) should entertain while it enlightens. Masquerades such as Ajofia entertains and educates and therefore, masquerades qualify as folklore. Laurence, goes further to emphasize that any literature that fails in the two functions does not worth any attention. According to him, such literature that only entertains without educating is compared to miniature golf or ping-pong. Basden's observation that masquerades are used to recover debts and they perform at funerals to entertain the audience vivifies that masquerading as an aspect of folklore, is a good example of literature since it performs the functions expected of good literature. In his “Mmanwu as a Pivotal Aspect of the African Drama: An Appraisal of the Performance of Njokoya,” Uche Nnyagu

disclosed that masquerades entertain the audience. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, we discover that while masquerades entertain, they equally settle disputes among and between individuals in Umuofia society. Achebe's fictional Umuofia symbolises the Igbo Society in reality.

### **Artistic and stylistic Skills of Ajofia**

Ajofia is a unique masquerade. As already noted, his physical appearance is entirely different from other masquerades. Apart from the physical appearance, Ajofia's performance is not to be compared to any other. One, his tune is not high pitched like that of Atumma. The voice is natural and solemn like that of an average old Igbo man, not in anyway, doctored. When Ajofia sings, one who listens will get every single word that he pronounces effortlessly because he pronounces the words slowly.

Another unique stylistics of Ajofia is his interior monologue. Interior monologue is a narrative technique, sometimes used as a synonym for the stream of consciousness. In dramatic and nondramatic fiction, it is a technique that exhibits the inner thoughts and ideas of the protagonist, usually loosely related impressions approaching free association or more rationally structured sequences of thoughts and emotions that pass through the minds of the protagonist. Ajofia exhibits the thoughts and ideas by profusely incorporating proverbs in his songs. More than ninety percent of his statements are proverbs, rendered as interior monologue. Though his followers sing the refrain to back him up, his ideas come spontaneously and he relays them as they come. The refrain sang by the followers of Ajofia to maintain the rhythm of the song remains the same phrase used from the beginning of each song to the end of the song. For instance, in the song “Gbawalu m Oji” the title of the song, “Gbawalu m oji” remain the refrain which the followers sing artistically until the end of the song.

It is very clear now that the followers of Ajofia Masquerade do not just follow for the sake of following, they participate actively in the performance. Apart from singing the refrain, they equally beat the local percussions that add colour to the performance. Like in the case of Mmanwu Pericoma Okoye of Arondizogu, there is a big

wooden gong, *ikolo* which is beaten by a well gifted person among the followers. The sound of the *ikolo* is loud and it makes the song unique and artistic. The *ikolo* seems to be the only noticeable musical instrument because the person that beats the *ikolo* follows the masquerade so closely as he artistically carries the *ikolo* and beats it to cohere with the wordings of the masquerade.

Another paraphernalia that gives the song unique artistic and stylistic aesthetics essence is the *Oji*, a staff designed to give a peculiar musical sound when performed by one who is veteran in playing it. The *oji* not an ordinary staff. According to one of the followers of the masquerade who pleads anonymity, the staff is fortified, “in fact, it is highly mysterious and that is why it is carried by one who understands the prowess and the significance.” The person with the *oji* performs *anyansi* and places the *oji* on the ground, lifts it and shakes it so that it gives a unique musical sound in unison with the sound of the *ikolo* and the wordings of the masquerade.

*Ajofia* is the only masquerade that comes to the stage with his own sound system. He has his own microphone though nobody sees him clutching the microphone. His only hand seen, holds the feather of an unfathomable bird. The feather is said to be used to wade off any weapon coming from foes. One of the followers of *Ajofia* carries a big speaker. The box speaker amplifies the voice of the masquerade so that it is heard beyond the place of performance.

### Appraisal of Select Songs of *Ajofia*

*Ajofia* has over hundreds of recorded songs. Most of the songs are recorded in the Igbo language while some are in English. Obviously, the songs in Igbo are more interesting and they so perfectly fulfil the aims. The Igbo folklore is relayed in Igbo, so it marvels the audience that *Ajofia*, a wonderful aspect of the Igbo folklore has some of his songs in English. It is well understood that *Ajofia*'s aim was to get his message passed down to all and sundry, including those who don't understand the Igbo language. However, that decision of *Ajofia* is not commendable. The researchers therefore, are not interested in the songs rendered in the English Language.

The song, “*Ana wele Wele*”, is a call to the people not to plan evil against anybody. *Ajofia* makes it vivid in this song that whatever that goes

up must eventually come down and therefore, people should understand that any ill down to anyone has repercussion on the evildoer. In a kind of supplication, *Ajofia* meticulously relays the ills that would befall on any evil doer. Though the song seems like a panegyric, extolling the achievements of a particular person, the masquerade has been able to subtly relay his message. Proverbs are profusely used and the message remains vivid. The song begins with a proverb which immediately arouses the curiosity of the listener. The sharp means the song starts with unambiguous proverb is apt. It goes thus:

*Dinta chugha anu ma e nweghi onye mgbachido na ya bu nkwukwu nalu n'efu*

*Chorus: Ana werewere*

*Egbusia aruru e meghe nchiko melu diji aruna ihe o koru n'ubi*

*Chorus: Ana werewere*

The opening of the song emphasizes the importance of humanity. He stresses the need for people to live gregarious life because people are made for each other. All through the song, only proverbs are used to pass the information. The proverbs seem unconnected but like a stream of consciousness except that the followers are constant with the singing of the refrain, “*ana wele wele*”.

All through the song, *Ajofia* keeps relaying the obvious fact, reminding the audience the need to appreciate one who does well for one and never to pay evil for good because every ill deed goes with punishment.

In his *Amara Oje*, his tune is not different from *Ana Werewere*, however the message differs. Here, the masquerade praises philanthropists whose names he didn't actually mention. His aim is not to sing panegyrics on anybody but to extol virtue. He blames the evil ones who fail to appreciate good things done by good spirited individuals. He supplicates and asks nature to deal with such sacrilegious persons.

He made it vivid that he who strives to do harm to an innocent person would rather be remunerated with ills, thus “*Agbusi gbawa ha obi*.” He emphasizes on the importance of tradition. “*Tradition*” according to *Ajofia*, does not die and a good traditionalist does not plan evil for anyone. He urges the real traditionalist who follows tradition and does good for the society

never to relent and never to fear the evil ones because according to him, the head of the just can never be cut off. He started the song by reminding the audience that law is law and law should be maintained for the society to be in serenity. He reels out the punishments that await the evil doers and then, the just and innocent benevolent ones would live long not minding the deeds of the evil ones. These messages he has been able to pass using proverbs still. The followers are consistent responding promptly with the refrain “Amara ojee!”

In his “Bokasi”, Ajofia used proverbs throughout the song. The fact that the proverbs are well used in the songs, makes the message of the song vivid and pleasant to the ear. In the song, Ajofia, while condemning atrocious and evil deeds on the part of the individuals in the society, does not believe that rash acts against the law breakers and criminals is the best thing to do. He advises individuals to live just life to avoid regret in future. The inspiration for the song comes from the activities of the administration of a certain governor of Anambra State of Nigeria who felt that the best way to combat crime was to invite a certain mysterious group, the Bakkassi boys. The group operated in mysterious ways, using mysterious means to dictate evil ones whom they murdered in the public and have the bodies of the murdered set ablaze. Ajofia lampoons the Bakkassi whom he alleges, connived with some wealthy men in the society to help them wreak havoc in the society. The masquerade reminds the evil doers that every action has a wage and therefore, they should do all they can to shun evil.

“Amara Ojee” is another beautiful song by Ajofia, embellished with Ajofia He starts with rhetorical questions. Embellished with apt stylistic devices. Not minding that all through the song, proverbs were used, the message of the song is very vivid. The tone of the song is high as obviously, the masquerade is angry, speaking of the acts of the evil ones who conspire against the innocent. In a melodious and serene voice, Ajofia disclosed that he is sad with the activities of the diabolical people and in the anger, he explored evil to visit the evil ones. In his voice, “Agbusi gbakwaa nu ha n’obi”, and his followers who sing the refrain, respond, “Agbusi gbowaa ha obi.”

The beginning of the song immediately reveals to the audience how angry the masquerade is. The audience, kept in suspense, listens to get the gist. Next, Ajofia employed another stylistic device, *rhetorical question*. “*I nunugo na egbupuru dike isi? Ka I nunugo na agbalu mmuo oku?*” The beginning of the song is an indication that what inspired the song is not to be happy about. Ajofia is seriously enraged about the state of disorderliness and the rate of ills in society when the goons derive pleasure in killing innocent people. Ajofia makes it vivid in his song that the end of any evil group is disastrous because blood of innocent victims killed would get certainly get them to their Ignominious end, thus, the above saying, “*I nunugo na egbupuru dike isi....*”

Ajofia uses proverbs so aptly to clearly pass across his message in the song. He advises against ill activities against innocent people and goes further to sternly warn those who use their little positions in the society to cause plights on the subjects to amend their evil ways. The masquerade believes in law of karma and therefore, he preaches moderation in people’s activities. He believes that the best approach in life is to live life of modesty and never to be an extremist. In his own words, “*O diri isi mma ka o dibalu aguba.*” He believes that the innocent ones would always excel and would never meet disaster no matter the plots of the evil ones. In other words, the innocent ones would not be caught in the traps of the evil ones. With the song, he encourages all to shun evil because there is no gain in evil. He prayed for those who keep their hands clean and who do not support evil, to live long and experience no misfortunes.

### Conclusion

In all the songs of Ajofia, we discovered that proverbs are profusely used. Proverb therefore, is an indispensable tool for the masquerade. The masquerade has endearing messages for his audience in all his songs. He believes that he addresses matured people and not kids, hence his reason for the use of proverbs. In Igbo, a popular saying has it that proverb is the oil with which words are eaten. Another, though derogatory as seems, has it, that when a proverb is used in a sentence and one present, demands for explanation of the proverb, the bride price paid by the father to marry the mother is a waste.

This emphasises on the importance of proverb in Igbo. Proverb is a thing for the sage and not for kids, Ajofia affirms this saying to be true and believing his messages are for the sage and adults, he uses proverbs and uses them as in

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