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**MASQUERADE AND MASQUERADING IN IGBO LAND: A RETROSPECTION ON OMABU-THE NIGHT MASQUERADES AMONG THE TRADITIONAL OGHE SOCIETIES OF THE IGBOS OF NIGERIA**

**Chidiobi, Okechukwu Christian**  
Department of History and International Studies,  
College of Post-Graduate Studies, Federal University Lokoja, Kogi State, Nigeria.  
E-mail Address: [okechukwuchris2020@gmail.com](mailto:okechukwuchris2020@gmail.com)  
Phone Number: 08067959754

&

**Ibekwe, Juliet Chinenyenwa PhD**  
Center for Excellence in Environmental Management and Green Energy (CEMAGE) University of  
Nigeria Nsukka (UNN), Enugu Campus, Nigeria.  
E-mail Address: [Juliet-Ibekwe.pg01600@unn.edu.ng](mailto:Juliet-Ibekwe.pg01600@unn.edu.ng)/[jullydio@gmail.com](mailto:jullydio@gmail.com)  
Phone Number: 08032724578

**Abstract**

*Masquerades are the spirits of the ancestors that manifest in masked forms to commune and interact with the living beings. Masquerade marks the return of the ancestors to the land of the living and the celebration of the lives of the deceased old men of the communities. Masquerading therefore involves all the activities that are associated with the preparation and presentation of the masquerades as well as the awakening and the re-awakening of the spirits of the departed young, matured, old men or the ancestors of a community and their transformations into masquerades. Masquerades are celebrated in many diverse cultural festivals, generally refers to as “masquerade feasts”. Masquerades are usually revered and feared by all in most culture particularly in Igbo Societies. Masquerade is an all-male affair that abhor female participations or involvement. It is a cultural thing that is not only seen all over Africa including Nigeria, but in many other places of the world like the South America, the Caribbean and some parts of Asia. In Africa and in Nigerian in particular, masquerades feature prominently among the Igbos of which Oghe people in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State is a major part of, and in which they are known for. This paper is therefore premised on the fact that so much have been written about masquerades by many Nigerian scholars in the disciplines of History, Sociology, Anthropology, Philosophy, Language and Igbo Studies, among which are those of Igbo descent of which again are those of Oghe’s extraction. In view of this, it is however, worthy of note that no single individual scholar of Oghe’s background has deemed it fit to write about Omabu- the night masquerade as a theme worthy of discussion. What we have seen so far were just the mere mentioning of it in papers and presentation passages that have to do with masquerades or other related topics on cultural issues. It is thus against this backdrop that this paper is borne to fill this intellectual lacuna by dedicating this detailed study on Omabu-the night masquerades among the traditional people of Oghe in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State. Using qualitative research method, this paper made an overview of masquerades in Igbo society –land and this include its meaning, definition, origin, classes as well as their functions. In addition to this, the concepts of society, culture and language as they relate to the topic of the study were defined and explained. It further examines the place of Omabu- the night masquerades in the traditional Oghe society in Ezeagu Local Government Area of the State Enugu. The factors that possibly led to its disappearances or non-existence in the contemporary time were also captured by the paper. The paper concluded by noting that Omabu-the night masquerades had impacted positively to the life of the traditional Oghe people. However, the authors are of the opinion that the cultural practice has as a matter of fact outlived its usefulness as it could no longer be sustained in the twenty first century of modern, globalized world. The study is therefore expository and descriptive. It equally employs oral interviews in addition to secondary data consulted. More so, reminisces and individual experiences and observations of the authors lend more credence to the study.*

**Key Terms:** Culture, Society, Language, Omabu-the Night Masquerade, Traditional Oghe People and Igbos of Nigeria

**Introduction**

The history of a people is embedded in their culture. Any society that losses touch of its culture has inevitably lost touch of its history. A people without a culture, is a people without a history. It is equally a people that lack a verifiable source of identity or recognition in the community of other races or ethnic groupings. Without a culture, every society faces potential threat of extinction as its language which is one of the major means of identification would be lost. In the words of one of the great Philosophers of African descent Marcus Garvey, as cited by Onwubiko (2026) in a Facebook post titled *Igbo as a nation, and Not as a Tribe*, “a people without their past history, origin and culture are like a tree without roots”. According to Chidiobi, Ibekwe and Chidiobi-

Uzoamaka (2021:108), culture is a major identity of any people. Those who decides to abandon their culture have automatically lost their sense of identity or recognition and are treated like a race being wiped out from the face of the earth. It is based on the continuous erosion of the core Igbo cultural values that the UN, some years back predicted the possible extinction of the Igbo language in the near future, which as an aspect of Igbo culture served as a channel through which other many aspects of Igbo culture are transmitted in a large part by teaching and learning. Culture is therefore the heritage of a people. It gives them meaning, sense of belonging and identity. It makes them feel unique and as an important integral member of the larger human society. And as such, man is not just a social and political being, but also a cultural person. That is to say, all individuals have their respective cultures that guide and influence their line of actions and thoughts (Uchegbu, 2022:40). In her view on culture, Emejulu (2020:55) is also of the same belief as in above when she stated that “every society is guided by a set of traditions which make up its culture”. She is of the opinion that “for a particular a society to exist and develop, its culture must be observed, acknowledged and even accommodate the dynamism of culture, this culture which serves as an item of identity. On this note, the great philosopher of change Heraclitus as cited in Anibeze (2014:23) posits that “all things are in a flux, and nothing is constant nor static, as they take different forms and are in constant change. However, he admitted that these things contain something which continues to be constant or the same throughout all the flux of change. Similarly, Obodo also cited in Anibeze (2014:23) in his seminar work on Dynamism of Culture observes that “any culture worthy of the name must necessarily change because man who is the molder of his culture constantly change”. The bottom line here is that both animate in inanimate especially in regard to material and non-material culture of man are in a constant flux. Culture, being a human creation, Nnaji (2022:22), as a result, informed us that man create what we know as culture in order to meet the needs of the day. That to him means that whenever an existing system outlives its use it gets displaced naturally by a new and better one. Thus, there is need to strike a balance between the new and the old culture and consequently preserve the old culture for historical purpose to avoid the scenario of throwing away the baby with the bathwater. Sharing the same opinion, Okafor (2003:202) observed that:

*Unlike other animals with rigid, complex behavioral patterns that enable them to survive in specific habitats, man was not born with such traits and thus must learn and invent ways of adapting to many different environment... and changes that occur over time which he encounters.*

With the adaptative characteristics of man, Nzimiro (1976) stated that man is usually regarded as the most mentally developed of all the animal kingdoms. An assertion that was reaffirmed by Obiajulu (2023:10) when he stated:

*From the Neolithic Age (about 10,000 years ago) to the present era of globalization, man has continued to improve on his intellect and environment. This to him is aptly reflected in his various cultural accomplishments; from the bow to the invention of writing, government, dynamite, steam engine, clock, airplane, spaceships, computers, etc. To this end, he observed that man has created many horrible cultural forms that can wipe out humanity when misused. For instance, the atomic bombs dropped in the two Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 that nearly obliterated the cities and the people.*

The Igbo ethnic group of which Oghe people are part of, are not just acclaimed religious people in their social orientations; having tremendous trust in God along with its associated spiritualism as observed by Okwesili (2024:2) and Anikwe (2021:10), but are deeply and uniquely endowed people with rich and enviable material and non-material culture which is second to none anywhere around the globe (Chidiobi, Ibekwe and Chidiobi-Uzoamaka, 2021:102). Thus, the traditional Igbo community as noted by Dons Eze (2016:84) is not lacking in its rich culture and tradition. As various communities in Igbo land have their own peculiar culture, tradition and belief, so also the people of Oghe extraction. In many of the different communities spread across Oghe and its environs, there are myriads of cultural festivals that were known to have been celebrated in the time past and which only a very few of them are still existing or surviving. According to Anikwe (2021:11–13) and Ibekwe (2014:72), these included but not limited to the following: “Otute”, “Mbazi”, “Mgba-Ogwu”, “Udumii”, “Ugwudele”, “Ugwu-Omala”, “Edemanii” and “Mgba-ogwu”. However, Aningo (2021:94) and Anikwe (2021:10) outlined three general and major cultural festivals held in every Oghe community to include Akanu (when married women reunite with their maiden relations), Ifha ji-oku (New Yam Festivals) and Ibono or Monwu Ibono (dreaded masquerade festival). Among many of the trado-cultural indicators for which Oghe and its people are universally known for, it is however important to single out her rich masquerade cultural festivals, otherwise known as Ibono or Mmonwu Ibono which is celebrated in all its communities except Neke where a version of it is referred to as Odo masquerade exist. Anikwe (2016:4) corroborated this assertion when he stated that “there is no gainsaying the fact that masquerade of which Oghe people is an important part of, has a very rich tradition in masquerade (Mmonwu) festival” To this end, it is important to note that there are various kinds of masquerades in Igbo land and in Oghe in particular, and a good number of them perform at night. Ozoeze (2023:143) listed some of them

as follows: Nwa-oliolio aghashi, Okwuna-Okpali, Eberi-Mgbuyo, Omabu agashi, among many others. This paper is however centered on a particular night masquerade known as Omabu as it was then seen and practiced in the traditional Oghe society. It therefore examines the concept of Omabu, the night masquerade, and its practice in the then traditional Oghe, the role the masquerade played at that period of history and the possible reasons this trado- cultural practice has gone into extinction. The paper equally shed more light on masquerades culture in Igbo land with some vital references from scholars of Oghe extraction as they have to do with masquerades among the oghe people. Though, the paper tried to reflect on the possible impact of Omabu otherwise refers to night masquerades in a traditional Oghe, it is however of the opinion that such practices is no longer feasible and useful in the contemporary time.

### **Background Origin of Oghe people**

Like the origin of the Igbos which Ekeimo (2015:28) stated that nobody seems to have the exact knowledge of, the origin of Oghe people is also confronted with similar identification challenges. The same way empirical and theoretical sources namely; local traditions, agriculture, philosophy, worldview/cosmology, linguistics, archaeology, ethnography or ethnic linkage, culture, history, anthropology, religion, geography and diasporas studies have failed to provide a unanimous account on the origin of the Igbos as observed by Ekeimo (2015:28), is equally how these factors have failed to provide general and acceptable or specific account on the historical origin of Ezeagu, the father of Oghe. There are therefore several accounts, oral traditions, stories, folk tales, myths and legends surrounding the background origin or the history of Ezeagu of which Oghe is one of the major progenitors. One account has it that Ezeagu who fathered Oghe and others came from Nkanu (Okafor, 2006). Another noted that Ezeagu who was the father of Oghe was the original inhabitant of its present location dating back to time immemorial and thus did not come from anywhere but autochthonous (Okachi, 1978 cited in Dons Eze, 2013:11). An intelligent Report of (1929) by a European Colonial Officer grouped Ezeagu of which Oghe is part of, among the larger Agbaja clan whose ancestors was Anugo who was said to had brought down from heaven by a vulture and placed on top of Uto Hill at Nsude in Udi Local Government Area of Enugu State. To Dons Eze (2013: 11), this particular account appears to be more of a myth or folklore. The research of Afikpo (1978), on its part, shows that “the Udi-Nsukka-Agwu Cuesta which includes the Ezeagu area in which Oghe is part of,” is the primary point of Igbo dispersal. This area according to him, is where every other Igbo group including Oghe sojourned before emigrating to other places where they currently occupy. Thus, the research suggested that Oghe people of Ezeagu just like other Igbo groups originated from here, and that it was the primary point of dispersal from where Ezeagu, the ancestor of Oghe originated from and migrated to its present abode. In the opinion of Dons Eze (1999), a pre-historic occupation of Ezeagu area by the forbearers of the present inhabitants was supported by some ancient stone sculptures found at Aguobu-Owa in the 1920s which were said to have originated from North Africa, suggested a possible migration of people from Sudan. Ozoeze (2023: 4) gave another version of Oghe’s history as passed down by oral tradition and told by late Eshim nwa Onyechi the oldest man in Iwollo Oghe, late Ozo Oguanya nwa Obodoze and late Ozo Anieke nwa Ozoeze. According to the story, Kwoko, a bravery but stubborn hunter left his home town Udi and proceeded to a no man’s land in the wilderness which is today called *Orie-Owa*. In the process of hunting, his traps “Igbudu” and “Idume” caught and killed many wild animals, among which was Odum-Lion. On his return to home, he narrated to them how he has killed many animals and has as a result, became the overall head of that whole area of land “Ezeagu” (King of the wilderness). With big shouts of triumph and jubilation all over the places, many of the people there started calling him Ezeagu while some called him Igbudu. It was he, kwoko, later to be known as Igbudu or Ezeagu that begot Oghe as one of his sons and it was the killing of Odum-Lion that changed his name to Ezeagu, king of Lion. On its part, an online WhatsApp forum titled “An Interesting History of Ezeagu” as shared, forwarded and received from Nwakpa (2019) asserted that Igbudu the ancestor of Ezeagu who begot Oghe migrated from Gboko in Benue State and was traced by oral history or tradition to the tribe of Gad, the fifth son of the biblical Jacob of Israel who migrated with his father and other siblings to Egypt during the great famine and was believed to have migrated from areas further north, possibly from Niger Confluence, and eventually settled in the area of Gboko. This account on the Jewish-Hebrew connection through the tribe of Gad has been corroborated and shared by many scholars of Igbo descent/origin among which are Professors Ikeanyibe and Alaeze as cited in Ezechukwu (2008) and Eze (2014:22–23). Furthermore, the same online source has it that Igbudu who was the father of Ezeagu, who in turn was the direct ancestor of Oghe migrated from Igala...land of Benue River...area into the Igbo belt to avoid the Fulani slave traders/traders.

However, among the various accounts, the most popular and perhaps the widely acceptable and believed story on the origin of the people of Oghe is that which stated that:

*Gboko migrated from Igala nation-land to the present Benue River to avoid raids from the marauding and itinerant Fulani slave traders. According to this account, Kwekwo or Kweko the son of Gboko found a fertile land and became a successful farmer. He therefore*

*remained in his birthplace, Gboko. Kwekwo's sons Ugbokolu and Igbudu went their separate ways as they moved towards the south. This movement eventually led to the settlement of Igbudu in the present-day Ezeagu of which Oghe is one of the offspring's/progenitors.*

Be that as it may, Oghe as one of the sons of Ezeagu married two wives. The first wife Mgbo-Orie who came from Okpogho gave birth to Owa, Oghe and Oghu respectively. The second wife Udeagu who was said to had come from Nkanu land had only one son, which she called Umu-Naa (meaning one-child which she equals to many, hence one-children), now pronounced Umama. Umama later rose into separate individual clans of Umumba, Obinofia and Obah respectively. They all lived at a location now known as Orie-Owa, which situates east of the Ajali River.

According to a legend or a historical account on the origin of Oghe by Ozo Bishop (2025), Mgborie, the first wife of Ezeagu whose father was the "Di-ji" of Okpogho, had a misunderstanding with her husband, Ezeagu, and that ugly development, as noted by the story, forced her, Mgborie, and her son Oghe, to leave Imezi-Owa, her husband's place, and cross over to the other eastern side of the Ajali River through the help of her father, the "Di-ji" of Okpogho, and other people of Okpogho. However, another legend as cited by Dons Eze (2018: 13) has it that a misunderstanding forced Oghe to move to the East of Ajali River and that this misunderstanding was between him, Oghe, and his elder brother, Owa, and not between Mgborie, the mother of Oghe, and her husband Ezeagu, as stated in the other account above. This misunderstanding, according to the story, was believed to be due to the scramble for land which, as a primary source of production at that time, was in very high demand. The story also has it that it was perhaps for the same problem that forced Oghu to move out and settle at its present location near Adada in Uzo-Uwani Local Government. Oghu is however currently being administered as part of Udi Local Government. Similarly, Obah, another son of Ezeagu, had emigrated to Ebenebe area and formed part of Awka North Local Government area of Anambra State. In 1948, the people of Obah petitioned the British Colonial Government requesting to rejoin their kith and kin in Ezeagu, but this was turned down by the then colonial administrators.

Oghe as the second son of Ezeagu settled at Orie-Oghe, situated at the eastern part of the present day Afor Oghe market where her shrine was located. The entire Oghe communities originally had their market there, which took place every Orie-day. Just like his father, Oghe married Mgbo-Orie who also came from Okpogho. After several years without a male child, however, Mgborie eventually had five sons-Owe, Akama, Neke, Oyofe, and Iwollo which are collectively referred to as "Ikenga" (right-hand side). His second wife, Udenkwo (Nwanya-Olo), on the other hand, had seven sons -Amankwo, Amaniodo, Akasa, Umuhu, Obagu, and Obiaja. Though an account has it that they are seven instead of the six stated here. They are on the other hand, collectively grouped as "Ibute-Oghe" (left-hand side).

Oral history has it that, at a period, the society was barbaric, fuelled by slave raiding and trading, it was thus characterized by fight syndrome. Powerful villages invaded and subdued weaker ones and sold them for wealth. As a result, many races vanished. Oghe as a consequence was reduced from ten male children to seven male children as presently constituted, with both Akasa and Umuhu being integrated into Amansiodo, while Obuagu or obuaja became assimilated into Amankwo. Meanwhile, Owe, the first son of Oghe, who could not withstand the hostility, heat and pressure ran into different parts of Iwollo for protection. Up till today, Owe is still identified in different remote parts of Iwollo (Dons Eze, 2013:11-12; Dons Eze,2014: 1-2; Nechi Okachi, 1978 cited in Dons Eze, 2014: 1-2; Online source, 2019; National Archives, Enugu, 2002).

### **A Survey of Oghe Land, Its People and Culture**

Oghe is one of the clans that constitute Ezeagu North Development Center of Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State. Geographically, Oghe land, according to Okwesili (2021:67) is located on Latitude 6°2'32' North of the Equator and Longitude 7°19'5' East of the Greenwich Meridian. Oghe alone is estimated to occupy about one quarter of Ezeagu Local Government Area, measuring about 155,468 square kilometers of these vast territory, grouped into autonomous communities. Oghe also measured about sixteen kilometers(16km) North-West of Enugu, capital of Enugu State (Ndu,2023:6). Oghe is placed within the tropical savannah region, with atmospheric wet climate that greatly supports economic activities including agriculture, which is fundamental for planting and harnessing of drug related crops and vegetation of all types. Hence due to abundance endowment of these varieties of plant, majority of which are medicinal values, Oghe people therefore find succour in the efficacious Ogwu Oghe or Oghe's medicine (Okwesili, 2021:67). This according to Anikwe(2014:5-6) has led to the emergence of many highly celebrated people of great knowledge and ideas in Oghe. Oghe people are greatly endowed with traditional medicine. As a result, mysticisms and inexplicable spiritual scenario or spiritualities have become a common occurrence among the people of the region. These mystical powers have

not only made the clan popular and the people revered, but has attracted comments from interested observers. Anikwe (2014:5) noted a scenario witnessed in 1970 when one Ezeji Ozoamalu of Umuodigbo Ihuonyia, whom apparently out of anger as well as the danger posed by an opposing masquerade group during an Ibono masquerades festival in Orie-market square, pointed to a branch of a tree and fell and many people took their heels. He therefore observes that such mystical powers and many more is a common feature of strong young men, masquerades groups and traditional medicine men in Oghe and Ezeagu local Government Area. Oghe shares common boundaries with Eke, Egede and Affa all in Udi Local Government Area in the North, Adaba, Uzo-Uwani L.G.A. in the West, Olo, Awah-Ndiagu in the South, the Owah group of settlements and Awaha-Imezi in the Eastern flank (Anikwe, 2013:21). On a general note, Oghe is bounded by Eke, Ogui-Agu-Eke, Egede, Affa, Amoffia-Agu, Adaba River, Okpogho Mgbuta, Okpogho-Imezi, Oghu, Ukwume, Akinyi, Olo, Mgbagbu-Owa, Awaha and Imezi-Owa (Ndu,2023:6). Oghe is also surrounded by popular and great streams/rivers like Ivo, Jaliko, Duu and Kalawu in almost every of its corner or boundary. As a heartbeat of Ezeagu Local Government Area, Oghe is the most Urbanized clan covering a mass of land area with thickly or densely populated towns /communities estimated to be over 100,000 persons and a population density of about 181 persons per square kilometer. On its terrain, 5% of the land mass is occupy by water, while 40% is highlands and 55% plains.

Oghe is one of the major ethnic groups or indigenous people that are found in the present-day Ezeagu L.G.A. of Enugu State. Others are Owah, Umana, Mgbagbu-Owa, Olo, Awaha and Okpogho clans respectively. Oghe is linked by a trunk "B" road from Ngwo 9th Mile through Eke and then to Olo, Umulokpa and to Ifite-Ogwali in Anambra State (Anikwe, 2018:21). Oghe is part and parcel of the historical Agbaja ancestry comprising Udi and Ezeagu LGAs which are by extension members of the popular "WAWA" language dialect spoken by Enugu people within the Igbo-speaking people of Nigeria. Oghe clan, and indeed Ezeagu, generally value and cherish four cardinal virtues which could be referred to as "FOUR Ms" and are as follows: (1) Mmadu (human beings) (2) Oghe has great value for Ishi-Agushi.Mmanya Nkwu (palm wine) (3) Mmgba (feasts and festivals) and (4) Mmanwu (masquerades which is ancestral spirits). Before now, Oghe was made up of ten clans, but presently, they have reduced to seven villages which include Owe, Akama, Neke, Amankwo, Amansiodo, Oyofe and of course Iwollo in order of their seniority. As a member of a larger traditional Igbo political society, Oghe people are republican and acephalous. Politically, Oghe is a microcosm of a larger Enugu West Senatorial Zone which include five LGAs comprising of Orji-River, Aninri, Uzo-Uwani and Ogwu (Chidiobi, 2019:31; Chidiobi & Ibekwe-Juliet, 2022:7; Ekwuazi, 2013:4). Like in most parts of Africa and Igbo society, Oghe people are acclaimed religious people in their social orientation, having tremendous trust in God along with its associated spiritualism. Their faith in God is explained by unstoppable method of adoration, sacrifices and chants that comes in manner better described as absolute. To them, everything about life and living revolves around the Almighty God, the creator of heaven and earth, including everything therein (Okwesili, 2024:26).

As a deeply religious being, Oghe man as observed by Anikwe (2021:10) always call on God in prayers any time kola nut arrives and cap it up with endless prayers of thanksgiving and adoration. Their religious life and that of the traditional Igbo society is noted by a pioneer Catholic Priest and evangelizer, Bishop Joseph Shanahan as cited in Dynan (1996:28) when he observed that:

*The traditional Igbo society, of which Oghe is part and parcel of, was very religious as every man had its own personal Chi, God or guardian angel which intervenes on its behalf before the Supreme Deity. According to him, each kindred have its own Chi, same for clan and the community at large.*

As noted above, Oghe people call on God in prayers in anything they do especially any time kola nut is presented. The eating of kola nut as observed by Dons Eze (2014:5) clearly manifests the unity, togetherness and love that exist between the Oghe man and other being in existence. As he wakes up in the morning, the Oghe man reaches out for his kola, offering it as a symbol of hospitality, unity and love. He uses it to invite the Supreme Deity through its other agents, the benevolent spirits and other various deities/divinities and ancestors for their intervention and assistance as well as for their blessings and protection through a litany of prayers, after which he breaks it, throws some pieces to the outside for the benevolent spirits, the ancestors, the deities and all other spirits to eat and then passes the remaining ones around through the youngest male present for distribution to everybody to have a bite. Kola nut is therefore the heartbeat of Igbo people's culture and tradition which Oghe is part of (Dons Eze, 2021:111; Ogwudile, 2021:54). That is why Nzekwu (1963:47) in Umeogu (2019:29) said that "among the Igbo, kola nut is a highly valued and indispensable product". It is also for this reason that kola nut as stated by Chinagorom (2019:13) cited in Uchegbu (2022:39) is listed as one of the integral part of Igbo culture which are not neglected in Igbo cultural festivals and other practices. Unless a kola nut is offered, Dons Eze (2024:111) stated that one or a guest may not feel welcomed by his host. In Oghe, just like in most parts of Igbo land, Dons Eze (2024:111) also averred that:

*It is the oldest man that breaks the kola nut and offers prayers in the process, while women are not permitted to break it, to pluck it from its trees, or even to pick its head from the ground. She must look for a man to do it.*

Prior to the advent of Christianity, the religion of Oghe man/people like in most traditional African communities, was African Traditional Religion (ATR). By this, they believed in the existence of a Supreme Being, which in Igbo language is given several names, few of which are: Chukwu or Chi-ukwu (the Great God), Chineke or Chukwu-Okike (the Creator of all things), Chukwu-Abiama (the source of all), and so on. They also believed in deities (Alusi), spirits, spiritual forces and lesser ones that act as media or intermediaries between man and the Supreme Being (Okafor, 1998: 139; Anikwe, 2021: 10; Onuoha, 1987: 11; Madu, 2003: 75; Njoku, 1980: 4; Dons Eze, 2014: 2; ibekwe, 2014:72).

Among the several agents or messengers of the Supreme Being (deity), Dons Eze (2014: 8) observed that the Ani (the earth goddess) remains the most important of them in Oghe land and that each community, clan and hamlet, as noted earlier on, has its own Ani. Associated with the Ani deity are smaller elements also in that category, which Okwesili (2021:73) and Dons Eze (2014: 3) stated to include Akwali, Anyanwu, Anuobu, Ahobunagu, Ugwu-hill, Akpu, Ogirishi and Ngwu, trees among others.

As a deeply religious people who believe in total obedience to God, Oghe communities are compels to celebrate thanksgiving in special patterns to mark the end of the farming season. These are celebrated community by community in the order of seniority among the clans in Oghe. Thus, this includes Ugwu-Omala celebrated by Akama, Udumi celebrated by Neke, Mgba-Ogo celebrated by Amankwo Ndiagu, Ugwudele celebrated by Amankwo Imezi, Edemanii-Ihuonya (Amansiodo Ndiagu); Otute by Amansiodo-Imezi; Mgba-Ogwu celebrated by Oyofe-Ngamikpo and Mgbazi celebrated by Iwollo people. It is however sad to note that virtually all of the above traditional and cultural celebrations have gone into extinction and have been replaced by the Christian-western versions of them in the following order: Akama-High Mass, which is celebrated every 15th of August; Amankwo Imezi celebrates Holy Trinity every October; Amankwo Ndiagu celebrates St. Paul; Neke –St.Theresa; Oyofe celebrates St. Francis; while Iwollo and Aguobu-Iwollo celebrates Sacred Heart and St. Martin's respectively, which have gone moribund (Anikwe, 2014: 4–5).

Most adult persons in a traditional Oghe land personified traditional symbol of God-Chi which is usually represented by an Ogilisi tree planted in a conspicuous corner of his compound. Oghe has some festivals which they celebrate in common across its various clans, and these include Akanu (when married women reunite with their maiden relations), Ifha-ji-oku (new yam festival), Ibono or monwu Ibono (masquerade festival), Ndihi, Itonri including Ori Oghe feast which is still in existence but being celebrated only by traditionalists from all other communities in Oghe (Ozoeze, 2023: 17).

Oghe people are peaceful, hospitable and accommodating. As a result, Ogwudile (2024: 50) averred that Oghe people offers kola nut which sometimes comes in forms of roasted yam, roasted dry meat, dried fish, groundnuts, garden eggs, bitter Kola, wine, tobacco and smoking pipe (for smokers) to their guests where and when the real kola nut is unavailable as an insignia of welcome... The people of Oghe as observed by Aniakor (2014: 87–89) are also endowed with great wisdom, patience and integrity. They are equally blessed with countless folklore tradition which to Anidiobu (2014: 84) is on the verge of extinction just like most Igbo cultural traditions. Oghe is widely known for her expertise in curative medicine. According to Anidiobu (2013) cited in Okwesili (2014: 17), Oghe people were and up till today are known to be the greatest diviners, producers and dispensers of herbal medicine. In times past, there was no Oghe family that had no special skills in the cure of one or more diseases. Thus, persons suffering from various ailments which had defiled western or orthodox medicine see Oghe as their last resort and destination (Okwesili, 2021:70–71). As a result of this, the Oyofe Ngamikpo people in Oghe who were predominantly native doctors/herbalists and who still practices herbal medicine till date have a period each year when they celebrate and show their uncommon ingenuity in traditional medicine (Aningo, 2021: 94).

The pre-colonial economic activities in Oghe were dominated by farming. Thus, the mainstay of the economy was agriculture which involves crop production and animal husbandry or livestock rearing. Consequently, agricultural activities and seasonal changes determined the calendar of most activities (Anikwe, 2021: 10). Presently, the people of Oghe are predominantly subsistence farmers producing varieties of staple food products which range from yam, casavas, garri, akpu, akidi, agbugbu, azamu, among other native varieties of food. They also keep livestock in little commercial quantities.

Oghe people are also blessed with one of the most beautiful landscapes or topography which are capable of making Oghe land a potential tourists destination choice. Some of these sites include for instance, Onakandi

spring, Nbuluzo spring, Iyi-Agbo stream, Iyi-Chioke Spring, Mmiri Adume spring, Nneoma Spring, Iyi Wandulu spring, Ozonu spring, Iyi-Oku, the Hot Spring and the Odegbigbi waterfall among many others. There are also rivers which borders Oghe. They include Adada stream, Ivo stream, Duu stream, Kalawu stream and Jaliko stream. There is also Malogwu Oyoyo, the changing rock which represents Gods abode (Amalu, 2014: 42; Onyike, 2014: 55; Anikwe, 2014: 36; Anikwe, 2021: 15; Chidiobi and Ibekwe-Juliet, 2022: 7).

Before now, the religion of the people was African Traditional Religion (ATR). Today, greater majority are now Christians and are predominantly of Catholic extraction with an insignificant Pentecostal faithful. Being the first church with obviously the highest followers/worshippers, the first Catholic Church was established in Iwollo in 1932 from which other parishes, stations and outstations were created. Christianity has therefore led to a shift in the culture of polygamy which the Oghe man in traditional society was known for, to that of monogamy; one man, one wife. Traditionally, Oghe people as opined by Dons Eze (2024:1) had their fundamental beliefs which kept them together for ages and which brought moral and ethical order in form of peaceful co-existence, lawfulness, industriousness and honesty in their original way of life. However, the imposition of Christianity by the European Christian missionaries had in the words of Ogwudile (2021:111) brought with it the culture of impunity in their behaviour and actions, which are exempt or secure from punishment or retribution; actions which now attract no reprisal or injurious consequences in the life of the contemporary Oghe people. Okwesili (2016:33-37) observed that Oghe communities are greatly blessed with assorted music types and dancing steps. According to him, some of them however appears occasionally, mainly at festivals and traditional occasions or only when invited to social function such as birth, burial, house-warming, marriage, religious ceremonies among others. The music can also be said to be gender, moody and climatically driven. He noted such music to include but not limited to Elefeleje, Atilogwu, Obie/Ikwo, Okwuna–Okpali/Odegelu, Oyogho (moribund) and the rest. Oghe people as an extension of Ezeagu Local Government of Enugu State has a particular and a popular dance performance known as “Mbali”, in which some other communities in Igbo land may have its variant (Okoloekwe, 2021:31). This dance performance according to him:

*Depend on gender, age and status of the performer. This dance is usually associated with cultural festivals or other celebratory events involving masquerades like the Ibono as well as funerals, title-takings, investitures or similar events. The dance is performed by broad categories of the Oghe people including young men, middle-aged old women, old men, titled men, children and even young women*

Oghe people, as true Africans, believe in life after death. To the Oghe people, death is never envisaged until one attains maturity and a very ripe, old age. Thus, every premature death is viewed as an anathema and a diviner is usually consulted to find the cause or the person responsible (Dons Eze, 2014: 7). In Oghe cosmology or worldview as in other Igbo communities, there is the belief in ancestors, seen as a person from whom one is descended (Okwesili, 2021: 6). Meanwhile, the titled men of Oghe include Ndi Nze, Ndi Ozo title holders and Ndi Ichie or the Igwes/kings (His Royal Highnesses/Majesties) and the Chiefs or the Chieftaincy title holders are all products of colonialism as it were in most parts of Igbo land and some places in Nigeria (Okoloekwe, 2021: 33).

As a people with unity of being, Oghe man knows that there is an organic link connecting all beings, animate and inanimate, the departed and those living on earth with the Supreme Deity who coordinates and directs the affairs of the universe. Thus, the Oghe man sees himself in his neighbours and not as an isolated person. He keeps to the norms and ethics of his people. He is aware of his common ancestry or filial relationship with every other person in the community. He sees every other person as equal before God and man. Finally, just like a child, the Oghe man loves fun and banter (Dons Eze, 2014). There is also the culture of family bond among the Oghe people where family ties are established, maintained and sustained by family members including the extended relations in near and far away places (Chidobi, Ibekwe-Juliet and Chidobi-Uzoamaka, 2021). Unfortunately, this culture is gradually going into extinction.

People of Oghe have two principal seasons that exist in the year. These are Udumii and Owuwoji (Owoji or Okochi), with the Udumii being the period of migration to the farms which start from January–March and lasting up till the month of September each year (Okwesili; 2016: 31–32). From the farmlands, the people subsequently return to the Imezi (village) briefly at about the middle of the year for the celebration of community’s mini masquerade festival known as Ibono Uwu as well as the Ifejioku (New Yam) festival. This is later followed by the main masquerade festival referred to as Ibono Okochi which holds in the individual’s communities at about the third or the last quarter of the year which is between October to December. Ozoeze (2023: 200) observed that there exists some economic potential in Oghe requiring exploitation and their harnessing. For instance, there exist Lake Heneke in Omughu, Okpoku waterfall in Ihueze, Uje waterfall in Imezi-Olo, Vom Vom waterfall in

Okpogho, Malogwu waterfall in Oyofo and others. There are also natural caves in places like Ogba-Ebi in Umungwoli Agba Umana, Mgbo Chukwu cave in Akpugor Iwollo, Odukuwa cave, Igbo Amata caves in Aguobu Owa and so on. In addition, there are fuel and gas deposits in Amankwo and Amansiodo, Iron ore in okpogho, coal in Utili in Aguobu Iwollo, Akama, Ugwu Etit Amansiodo and Ugwu Ozonu Amansiodo. There is also a prospect of fossil oil at Aguobu Iwollo.

### **An Overview of Masquerades in Igbo Society-Land**

Masquerades as one of the oddest cultural practice or festival, is known to have existed in many places around the world. It is therefore not a new phenomenon but has been in vogue since in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century when masked performers danced and acted, situation which developed into a form of drama with scenery and music (Ozoze,2023:137). From the above assertion, it can thus be inferred that the Igbos of Nigeria of which Ezeagu people and Oghe are part and parcel of, simply borrowed a leaf from this old exiting masquerade culture in the world. Nnaji (2022:22) thus argued in support of this observation when he noted that initially that masquerade was not part of Igbo societies, but with observation and need, it got adopted to several places across Igbo land and its people. Masquerades according to Okodo (2019:128) are therefore very vital aspect of the culture of Africans, especially the Igbo people. To him, masquerades have come to stay in spite of the effect of Christianity on the incompatible aspects of African culture to it, thus masquerades and masquerading are thriving. Be that as it may, masquerade society has known to be part and parcel of ancient traditional Igbo societies and forms an important part of Igbo history.

In different parts of Igbo land, masquerades are generally called numerous or different names such as “Mmonwu,” “Mmanwu,” “Mmuo’ “Maa” “Mewu” “Ndumma”, Monwu, Onyewani among the rest (Ozoze, 2023: 150; Nnaji, 2022;22; Onyeneke,1987:1). As rightly observed by Dons Eze (2016: 84), masquerades vary in sizes, in appearances and outlook, attracting and repelling, some beautiful and aggressive, others lovely and effeminate like Adanma (Agbogho Mmuo or female masquerades) etc. These qualities as noted by Dons Eze (2016:84) combine to make the Igbo masquerade an outstanding spectacle which cannot be fully viewed while standing at one position. Unlike Monwu Obiagu or Monwu Christmas as found in the urban centers/cities, traditional masquerades otherwise called Momwu Ibono among the Oghe people are believed to be the true reincarnation of the dead. They are said to originate from certain anthills, from holes, or from somewhere in the bush (Okafor,1995:39; Dons Eze, 2016:82; Ojielo,2018:23). According to Ogbukagu (1997), “masquerades represent the image of our dead relatives coming from the world beyond to this earth after which they disappear”. Dons Eze (2014:3) therefore observed that the Oghe man does not believe that his great ancestors would have suddenly develop wings on departing this physical universe and flown into the sky. Instead, he sees his ancestors as comfortably seated, body and soul, in their beautiful homes in the underworld, while actively participating in the affairs of their offsprings which upon necessary invocation appears to the people/ the living in form of masquerades. It is this traditional Igbo belief or worldview that made Dons Eze and Ochinanwata (2023: 44) to state as follows:

*From time to time, the dead like to return to the earth in form of masquerade to have communion with their descendants and share in their joys and tribulations. They will bring them good wishes from the spirit world and carry back their requests to the land of the spirits. On their part, the living will approach the masked spirits, the spirits of their ancestors, friends or relations, with love and respect. They will offer them gifts and solicit their assistance in interceding on their behalf for good health, long life and material benefits.*

Similarly, Dons Eze (2011: 95) is of the opinion that Mmanwu (masquerade) provides a medium through which the dead and the living inter-mingle: Thus, it is a symbolic relationship between the living and the dead. It is on this note that Mbiti (1986) refers to:

*The dead person as “living-dead,” whose personal immortality is expressed or externalized in masquerade by the living through sacrifices, the pouring of libations and other rituals which are therefore symbols of communion, of fellowships and remembrance, the mystical ties that bind the “living-dead” to the people on earth.*

The origin of masquerades is another aspect of masquerade and masquerading that has attracted comments from scholars in Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences and those in African studies. There are however, divergent viewpoints concerning this. To Okodo (2018:126), some people speculate that masquerades started existing by a group of people gathering as a matter of necessity, to provide a phenomenon that would take powerful authority over man, and that would deter the recalcitrant members of the societies who would disagree with the community leaders or disobey lawful authorities with ignominy. Some authorities, including Adiele Afigbo as cited by Okodo (2019:126), supports the idea of the origination of masquerades from the Igbo land. Ora tradition/history as given

by Ozoeze (2023:149) in his book *Revisited History of Ezeagu People: Past and Present* lend credence to this autochthonous origin of masquerade in Igbo land. Tracing the origin of masquerade, Ozoeze narrated the story of a hero, a veteran wrestler, a philanthropist, farmer and most of all a hunter who fell into a pit-trap called “Idume” during one of his hunting escapades and remained there for four native weeks (16 days) before he was found and rescued. Ozoeze (2023:149) noted that during his rescue; the hunter exclaimed “Mmanwu!” meaning “I will not die! I will not die!!” to the hearing of his sympathizers. As a result, everyone in the village and environs started calling him Mma-nwui as a nickname. According to Ozoeze (2023:149), though Mmanwu later died and was buried in line with his people’s custom and tradition, however, after three market weeks (12 days) of his burial, some of his people began to see him as a spirit and that led the elderly people to consult a fortune-teller who revealed to them that Mmanwu died in flesh and not in spirit. The old men were therefore asked to do certain incantations, invocations and rituals to enable Mmanwu or Mma-nwu appear as a masquerade. The school of thought opposed the view that masquerade originated from Igbo land, but rather as borrowed culture from the external influence or copied from different places such as Igala land, the land of the Efiks, among the rest, were according to Onyeneke (1987:45), include Basden (1983:294), Jones (1945:193), Jeffreys (1949:141) and Nzekwu (1960:141).

There are varied definitions and meanings of masquerades to many different people. To those in the towns or urban centers, particularly the women, masquerades are seen as human beings that are masked up for the purpose of entertainment of people on occasions of Christmas, Easter, New Year and others. (Okodo, 2019:124). Okodo also see masquerade as a masked personality of being that is removed from the knowledge of man. Dons Eze (2018:88) see masquerades in a traditional Igbo belief as signifying or representing ...a certain spirit or ancestor ... who from time to time ... return to earth, to have communion with their descendants and to share in their joys and tribulations; bringing good wishes from the spirit world and carrying back their requests to the land of the spirits. Similarly, Okoloekwe (2014:28) saw the original idea of masquerade in Oghe and indeed the whole of Igbo land as that which represents the spirits of the departed ancestors which is linked to the ancestral worship prevalent in the area in years past. Okwesili (2014:20) described masquerade (Mmanwu) simply as an invincibility of being representing the spirits of the dead on the surface earth. In the words of Ozoeze (2023:150), Mmanwu is also a spirit and not a human being. Okodo (2019:125) further noted that the typical Igbo man believes that the masquerade comes from the land of spirits. Nzekwe (1981:131), equally holds the same view as he sees masquerades as the spirits of ancestors, while Horton (1981:483) believes that masquerades themselves have spirits that could be appealed to with fowl invocations for the achievement of successes. Masquerade was described by Nwabueze (2003:746) as an ideal hero because of his possession of the qualities of honour, reverence, veneration, accomplishment and excellence. He also opined that “what is being personified in a masquerade is a revered Igbo ancestor invited back to life to commune with the living”. For Ugonna (1983:1) masquerade is any masked figure with eyes, arms and legs exposed to spectators. He further gave another meaning of masquerade “as a masked character”.

In Igbo land, Ozoeze (2023:138) stated that masquerades are classified into three categories namely: Monwu, Omaba and Odo. He observed that in Monwu areas, the Egwugwu, Omambala and Ekpe masquerades among others are classified as the biggest while in Odo areas, Ezeodo is the highest and most respected. In Oghe land and indeed in the entire Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State, masquerades in this word of Ozoeze (2023:137) are notably identified as Monwu masquerade and Odo masquerade. He informed that almost all the communities in Oghe and by extension Ezeagu perform monwu masquerade, with the exception of Okpogho community and the clans of Enugu Neke Oghe and Ugwu Ekenu, Enugwu-Awha clan respectively which performs Odo cult particularly Odo Ogene.

Using Adazi-Unukwu as an example, Ogbukagu (1997) divided masquerade into:

❖ **Ikpo-Manwu (Mmonwu Utali and Manwu-Mgbajala)**

This he sees as mobile kind of masquerades that parades the length and breadth of the town disturbing, flogging/whipping and chasing people around and here and there especially those that crosses their paths and women who dress provocatively. According to Okodo (2019:127), these types of masquerades make festivals lively and fun, and they include Akatakudo, Ajibusu, Ogolo, Imababi, Inmyi, etc. To Donseze (2016:83), Ojielo (2018:24) and Ozoeze (2023:145), these whip-wielding masquerades in Oghe land and in Ezeagu by extension are Aguanu-Ojii, Ochiri-Opu, Nwankita, Utobo, Iga, Uvu, Igiri, etc. These categories of masquerades also perform traditional and peculiar Mbali dance performance which Ezeagu people particularly Oghe, are known for, and which are associated with the Ibono masquerade festival. These types of masquerades are also known as Mmonwu Christmas or Mmonwu Obiagu. They are mainly for entertainment purposes and wears no protective nor offensive charms nor amulets. Emeka (1993) observed that the province of Mmonwu Christmas or Mmonwu Obiagu is “drama, song and dance”. To him, these masquerades also include Ulaga, Ojinma, Okwonma, Akwuna-eche-enyi, etc. The principal actors in this group or types of masquerades (whipping, dancing and singing masquerades) as asserted by Miachi (2012:21) cited in Ogu (2023:3) are the youths who formed themselves into

camps or groups and presented dancing masquerades which at times are for competition and at other times for gifts from the public or members of the community.

**\* Mmanwu Melu-asaa (Highly Specialized and Sophisticated Masquerades).**

These types of masquerades as noted by Okodo (2019:127) are the prestigiously gigantic masquerades which are sponsored by age grades, villages or other organizations. They are used in the outings of organizations for their occasions which could be launchings, funerals and other ceremonies such as the title-takings, investitures or similar events like masquerade festivals such as Ibono masquerades festival. These kinds of masquerades are identified by Ozoeze (2023:144–145) and Okodo (2019:127) to include Enyi, Odum, Ugo, Ijele, Akpoko, Ojiegbe, Adamma, Atunga, Izaga, to name but a very few.

Another masquerade which falls into this class is the Agbogho-Mmuo or Adamma otherwise known as maiden masquerade which Emejulu (2003:58) also describes as an “entertainment masquerades”. Many of the masquerades here are dancing masquerades. For example, Ada-Atilogwu, Adamma (Agbogho-mmū), Okwuna-Okpali, Ija N dibunagu, etc. It is said that once some of these masquerades starts to operate, that everybody puts off his or her lantern and goes to bed particularly the women and the uninitiated. It is also said that this type of masquerades causes electric bulbs to crack into pieces and burn. These masquerades to Ozoeze Ozo (2023:145) include Omabu, Obunuko, Oganigwe, Obute, Odegelu, Okwuna-Okpali, Nwa-Oliolio, Aghashi, Ukomagidi, etc which are found in Oghe and in many parts of Ezeagu. In Ezeagu Local Government Area and Oghe land in particular, Ozoeze (2023:138) averred that some masquerades personified animals such as Elephant- “Enyi”, Buffalo- “Atu”, Leopard- “Agu”, Lion- “Odum”, Cow - “Atungga”, Bird - “Ugo”, to name but a few. Such masquerades like the Ogbunma - “one who kills with knife” and Mgbedike- “time for the brave” represent a few examples of these masquerade which, according to Dons Eze (2016:84) and Ojielo (2018:24) typify manliness, strength and war valour. They noted that they are age-grade masquerades which are used to avenge many misdeeds on the community by an enemy or rival communities. These masquerades as stated by them are equally used during funeral ceremonies of notable war heroes and only real men, who are indeed men and not women in men’s clothing, are admitted into these groups. It is important however, to know that the dancing, flogging and many of the highly specialized masquerades as listed so far serve as medium of entertainment. Also, the classifications of masquerades as we have seen in this paper above is according to Emejulu (2003:58) varies slightly from one community to the other but basically are the same but with different names.

In masquerade and masquerading in Oghe, as it is in other Igbo societies, women do not participate in the process. Even the dead women do not appear as masquerades to assess the land they once lived. However, there are apparently female masquerades like Adamma or Agbogho-Mmuo otherwise known as maiden masquerade, as notably found in some parts of Igbo land like in Ngwo in Udi Local Government Area, Akama in Oghe in Ezeagu Local Government Area and Aku in Nsukka Local Government Area, all in Enugu State (Dons Eze, 2016:84; Ojielo, 2018:24; Ugwu,2007). According to them, these masquerades are purely effeminate masked spirits that lacks physical prowess, but are noted for their good looks, attractiveness, feminist gait and beautiful dances or dancing steps. Okodo (2019:129) observed that the maiden masquerade or the Agbogho-Mmuo dresses like a maiden with her beautiful feminine face and possesses pointed breasts to demonstrate her prime age. Emejulu (2003:58) on her part, expresses awareness of the existence of this type of masquerade when she pointed out that maiden masquerade is a masquerade with a beautiful feminine mask, manifesting other female features like long hair, well-made face, wearing of ear-rings, necklaces etc. Ottenberg (1961) as cited in Emejulu (2003:58) also acknowledges Agbogho-Mmuo/Adamma or maiden masquerades and states that “she, the masquerade, wears the mask of a female face”.

However, it is of importance to note that masquerades have so many functions which they perform in most Igbo societies where they exist. These functions as identified and listed by Nnaji (2022:23) include but not limited to: entertainment, social-roles, disciplinary measures, security, conflict resolution, communication of religious meanings or representatives of the deities or the dead. He equally stated that masquerades are used during traditional activities, burial ceremonies or funerals, exhibitions of work of arts and also as local police. For example, Odozi-Obodo masquerade in Akama Oghe which would go through the community lanes, village squares, Obodo, etc. to inspect areas not properly cleared or swept and would clear them and in return asked to be paid for his labour in form of fines. Many of these functions and other related ones are equally stated in Ozoeze (2023:38); Dons Eze (2016:86–88); Ojielo (2018:25–26); Okodo (2019:127–128); Emejulu (2003:58) and Miachi (1980:24) cited in Ogu (2023:8) and Oji (1999).

**Omabu-Night Masquerades in Traditional Oghe Society**

In Igbo land nay Oghe society, there are quite a number of masquerades which are both dirnual (day time) and nocturnal (night time) in their respective engagement with the people. Some of the examples of these masquerades are Odegelu, Obute, Oganigwe, Okwuma-Okpali, Ekwunito na Agu Ogba Iwollo, and many others.

There are also those masquerades who performs exclusively at night (Nocturnal) which Omabu Fell into such category. Other masquerades who also belongs in this category or class are Obunuko, Eberi-Mgbuyo, Nwa-Oliolio Aghashi, Ukomagidi and so on.

Like the periodic diurnal masquerade festivals such as the Mmonwu Ibono which performs twice in a year, the Omabu, night masquerade on the other hand is also a seasonal masquerade that performs or comes out between the month of January and February every year in the traditional Oghe society. The Omabu night masquerades were usually accompanied by the young men, the initiated and sometimes by some elderly men in the community. According to Miachi (1980:24) as cited in Ogu (2023:3), grown up men and elders assembled at night to enter into dialogue with the ancestor by bringing special messages from the gods of the land. Omabu, the night masquerades, usually start their performance activities between 9-10pm everyday within the stipulated period of their outing. It usually lasts for about 4-5 native weeks (or market days). The Omabu night masquerades commences their performances or outings every night by letting out frightening spirit-filled sound or cry which at times could come simultaneously from all the corners of the village or community. The initial sounds which come intermittently before the eventual outing and performance proper serves as warning signals to the members of the community. To the late-night cooking women, it is a way of telling them to hurry up with their cooking or better fill to abandon their cooking completely or leave them in the hands of their husbands or their matured and initiated male children, brothers, relatives and so on. To ignore the warning sounds of the Omabu night masquerades means that one or such woman was prepared to face the consequences of stumbling or bumping upon the Omabu masquerades or seeing them. To the promiscuous women or the late night keeping or crawling women, the warning cries and the sounds of the masquerades were for them to hurry up home or better still to stay put or remain where they were for the rest of the night. To the uninitiated youngsters whom their parents negligently allowed to loiter around and who may be somewhere playing in the neighbor's house or who were engaged in folktales somewhere or in what is called "Egwuonwa" (moonlight play) in Igbo languages, the sounds of the Omabu were also to remind them that it was time to go home and retire to their respective sleeping beds while listening to the masquerades in fear in the comfort of their houses. In the words of Ozoeze (2023:139), night masquerades (Mmonwu Agbashi) like the Omabu, operates between 10pm-4am. Little children respects night masquerades for they don't make noise nor cry when they heard of their sounds or cries or when the masquerades were on stage and performing. Women usually prepares their dinner on time during the Omabu night masquerade period to avoid problem with the said masquerades nor getting in their ways nor those of the participating young men and adults. More so, wayward women or prostitutes do not move about late in the night to also avoid seeing the Omabu, the night masquerades and its concomitant consequences. It is therefore prohibited for women nor the uninitiated youths/ youngsters nor even the teenagers to see the night masquerades. Lending credence's to the above assertion, Okodo (2019:130) averred that:

*The night masquerades, of which the Omabu in the traditional Oghe societies were a major part of, were not meant to be seen by the women folk. He noted that just like many other night masquerades, the Omabu night masquerades expresses their secrecy so far, they move in the darkness of the night...*

On a general note, every masquerade that sometimes stays up late at night including the diurnal ones or the ordinary day time masquerade which the women are permitted to see, eventually becomes night masquerades at this instance, and consequently, the women are not expected to see them by any means again at this period. Paraphrasing Okodo (2019:130),

*No woman had ever seen some of the dreaded masquerades of which Omabu is one of, had ever lived to tell her story. He however noted that there is this general belief that these masquerades know when women catch glimpses of them and that such women die of the potency of their magical power.*

Just like other deadly masquerades, Omabu, the night masquerades were very much feared by the people of Oghe, particularly the women, the children as well as the uninitiated youngsters. As stated by Okodo (2019:127), these types of masquerades hate and detest to see light in the night. Once it starts to operate everybody puts off his lantern and goes to bed. It is said that this type causes electric bulbs to burn and crack into pieces. Contributing on this, Okwesili (2016:36) on his part stated that this particular masquerade like every other masquerade in Igbo land is an all-male affairs and appears only at night especially at harvest season which Okodo(2019:127) saw as season of rest. Okwesili (2016:36) further noted that the masquerade is the police of the community, entertains through singing and making jest of the offenders of the communal norms, traditions, etc. The night masquerade, Omabu or Monwu Aghashi have the habit of singing and chanting in their outings. Sometimes they have a way of entertaining their audience through their songs while they were ensconced in their sleeping beds or while they were awake and listening to the songs of the Omabu. The songs of the Omabu masquerades were sometimes melodious and harmonious, a kind of lullaby. These songs could be in praise of someone or certain members of

the community who had distinguished himself or themselves through achievements and societal contributions and selfless sacrifices to the community or through their moral conducts which portrays integrity, honesty, transparency, probity, and uprightness in issues bothering the community and/or humanity. On the other hand, the masquerades used to chant in an incoherent tune that insults, abuse, scold and taunt erring, offending, troublesome, diabolic as well as lazy and unproductive members of the community while at the same time they are being cajoled to turn a new leaf and becomes useful to themselves and the entire community. It is based on the above that Dons Eze (2016:88) stated as thus:

*Night masquerades Omabu inclusive were no respecters of persons and of status- the rich and the poor, the young and the old, men and women all would have their secrets exposed before every member of the community. This was a way of instilling discipline, of changing the lives of the individual members of the society or the community.*

Dons Eze (2016:87) further averred that:

*Night masquerades would not hesitate to reveal the misdeeds of every individual member of the community. An unfaithful housewife who would jump from one bed to another would have her lustful and lascivious escapades revealed, exposed and at the same time are being warned of the unpleasant consequences should she persist with her irresponsible behavior.*

The same goes to promiscuous and womanizing young females and males of the community. A lazy young man who is afraid to handle a hoe like Unoka in Chinua Achebe's (1978) "Things Fall Apart", would have a music composed in his name by the masquerades, and told to better change his sex and become a woman.

### **The Place of Omabu, the Night Masquerade in the Traditional Oghe Society of Igbo Land.**

As a nocturnal masquerade, Omabu played a number of significant roles in the traditional communities/villages in the Oghe society. The individual's reminiscent of the authors on Omabu as a night masquerade are however in line with the submissions made by Okoloekwe (2025) and Anikwe (2025) during a separate telephone interview sessions which the authors had with them on the issues surrounding the Omabu night masquerades. They therefore noted the following as the benefits of Omabu- night masquerades among the traditional people of Oghe's extraction.

#### **1. Watchdog of the communities**

As night masquerade, Omabu according to this study served as watchdogs of the various communities and villages across the then traditional Oghe land where such culture was practiced. During many of its nocturnal seasonal outings or performances, Omabu had helped to keep eyes on literally every member of the community. It had helped to keep the people alert and remind them that they were being watched by spiritual beings who would not hesitate to reveal and expose their evil conducts and every atrocity they committed against any member of the community (or the land) or other acts that were not in line with the societal norms and traditions. Those involved in iniquitous acts were chastised, berated, embarrassed and insulted and at the same time they were urged and advised to refrain from their evil ways and turn a new leaf. They were equally reminded that there were consequences for their actions especially failure to have a change of heart. At times, perpetrators of heinous condemnable acts were also advised to confess their sins before the entire community to avert possible calamities from befalling on them or on any member of their families or loved ones.

#### **2. Promiscuous Women Were Exposed**

Promiscuity is one abominable act which is against many societal norms in many parts of Africa, and Oghe Society is not an exception. No woman who sleeps around with different men apart from the lawful spouse is ever loved by the community when her sexual escapades are leaked. According to Dons Eze (2016:87) and Ojielo (2018), an unfaithful housewife who would jump from one bed to another would have her lustful adventures revealed, exposed and warned of the unpleasant consequences should she persist on such irresponsible, inglorious, and ignominious behavior. This helps to instill discipline, of changing the lives of the individual women of the society into responsible and accountable good housewives.

#### **3. Encouraged Responsible and Hardworking Members of the Society**

The Omabu night masquerades had a way of making everyone responsible and hardworking irrespective of sex. The masquerades therefore were no respecters of persons and status- the rich and the poor, the young and the old, the men and the women would all have their secrets exposed (Dons Eze, 2016:88). For instance, a lazy young man who was afraid to handle a hoe as rightly portrayed by Unoka in Chinua Achebe's (1978) "Things Fall Apart", would have a music composed in his name by the masquerade, and told to better change his sex and become a woman. In other words, lazy men who could not fend for their families were rebuked and mocked, the same with a lay-about who goes about the village doing nothing or drinking. Men who behave and talks like women or who beats their wives were put on the spot. Similarly, lazy women who would not do their wifely duties or who could not take care of their homes while their husbands toils day and night to provide for the

families were taunted by the Omabu night masquerades and at the same time were advised to change for the better. The same is applicable to those of them who cook late in the night and the likes.

#### **4. Relaxation and Entertainment Purposes**

Just like every other diurnal masquerade, the Omabu masquerade provided good source of entertainment for traditional Oghe people irrespective of age, status and sex. Everyone including adults, women and even children enjoyed the entertainment they provided during every of their nocturnal seasonal outings as observed by Ibekwe (2025). These occasional outings were always trailed with beautiful melodious rhymes, chants and songs that always thrilled their audience in the comfort of their beds. After the usual everyday farming activities that were associated with the harvesting period of the agrarian Oghe people, the night was of course a period to relax and unwind. So, at this period, the night masquerades/ Omabu came in handy to make the night memorable, interesting and exciting with their entertaining songs which sometimes were in praise and adoration of deserving individual community members who had brought honor to the community and to themselves and their families in particular.

#### **5. Promoted Peace, Unity and Harmony among the People**

Through the performances of Omabu, the night masquerades, peace, order and unity were promoted and encouraged among the traditional Oghe Communities, villages or kindred. Warring members of the community were sometimes cajoled and asked to sheath their swords to make peace reign. Solutions concerning issues of community interest and wellbeing were sometimes proffered by these dread Omabu masquerades. Omabu were equally used to reintegrate those who choose to remain indifferent to community problems by singing their praises and praying for them to be part of the community activities. They could speak in parables, riddles and proverbs which were meant to educate, inform and to counsel members of the community in general issues of life. They are often sources of knowledge and wisdom as they are filled with these virtues. Through their occasional and seasonal outings, they have helped the people to change their perceptions of life. Also, those who felt wronged or offended by the community were sometimes being asked by the Omabu-night masquerades to forgive their offenders or the community as the case may be. Thus, they helped to promote attitudinal changes for a better, peaceful and harmonious society and co- existence among the people.

#### **6. Uphold Societal Virtues, Moral Values, Customs and Traditions.**

According to Ozoze (2025), Omabu, night masquerades in the traditional Oghe society, at times advises the people to live right and to display honesty, transparency and uprightness in their dealings with one another and life in general. People were asked sometimes through their songs to keep their hands clean and to refrain from ugly vices such as cheating, stealing, backbiting, witch-hunting and other evil practices that breeds discord, disunity and conflict in the society or community. The masquerades also urge the members of the community to distinguish themselves individually as women and men of integrity worthy of emulation. The need to conduct oneself in line with the customs and traditions of the people were equally encouraged while they equally reminded the people of the possible consequences of going against the traditions of the community or engaging in any act considered abominable or condemnable by the community, villages or kindred.

#### **Extinction of Omabu-the Night Masquerade in the Contemporary Oghe Society**

A number of factors were believed to have necessitated the extinction of the cultural practice of Omabu night masquerade in today's Igbo land. Anikwe (2025) identified the following to be among the reasons.

Stealing happened to be one of the serious factors believed to have led to the disappearance of the Omabu night masquerade in Oghe of today. During the seasonal outings of the masquerades, Anikwe (2025) noted that some of the youths of the community have in recent years used the opportunity to steal from the people and burgle others houses especially those who were not around, thus carting away properties worth thousands and millions of naira, leading to pains and sorrows on their victim as well placing heavy financial burdens of replacing new ones on the affected families. This ugly development which became re-occurring decimal in the masquerading activities of the Omabu, breed disenchantment among the people and their loss of interest in sustaining the once cherished cultural practice of the Oghe people.

Another reason as stated by Anikwe (2025) was that some of the allegations or accusations that were made by the masquerades against some members of the community in recent times were baseless, scandalous and could not be substantiated beyond every reasonable doubt. He maintained that the Omabu night masquerades were infiltrated by miscreants and malevolent individual members of the community who manipulated the masquerading activities and fomented troubles and laid false allegations against innocent members of the community with the intents to tarnish their hard-earned images. The masquerades were therefore manipulated into delving in issues that could not be proven. Against this backdrop, Anikwe (2025) noted that in the present time and age, that any campaign of calumny, slander or undue aspersions to smear the names of persons under the guise of night masquerade or masquerading may not be taken lightly by those affected, as it might lead to litigation against the persons or individuals who champions the course of the night masquerades during the seasonal outings.

The search for greener pastures is also one of the cogent reasons that led to the abandonment of the cultural practice of Omabu night masquerades and their subsequent extinction in contemporary times. The emergence of large-scale urbanization and the quest for paid white-collar jobs in government establishments and private companies compelled many Oghe people to move out to urban centers. Thus, triggering a shift from the agrarian economy to which the people were known for. This situation finally culminated into gradual extinction of Omabu night masquerades as a cultural practice because of the drastic reduction in population of the people particularly the youth who constitute greater majority in the masquerading activities as well as who played great role in it. Lastly, Christianity is another factor that contributed so much to the eventual extinction of Omabu as a night masquerade in Oghe land. It is regrettable that many Christian adherents have mistaken quite a number of Igbo cultures, customs, values as well as traditional practices of African Traditional Religion (ATR), and describe them as pagan practices. Against this backdrop, many cultural practices across different parts of Igbo land, of which Oghe people belong, have been discarded and abandoned as they are seen as the activities of the pagans. This development has thus affected the continued survival of Omabu night masquerade as many Oghe people began to see the practice as fetish because of their new-found faith in Christianity.

According to Anikwe (2025), it is believed by many that Omabu night masquerades have outlived their usefulness as it appears to be no longer relevant and acceptable in the modern time and age. The fact is that the world has evolved, and will continue to evolve. We no longer live in the primitive, dark era where every societal practice exist to satisfied the yearnings or aspirations of every Tom, Dick and Harry. Therefore, some cultural practices can no longer be accommodated in the present time as they are regarded as old fashioned, primitive and crude. For instances, with the growing awareness of people about their fundamental human rights, one cannot comfortably restrict people's rights of movement in the guise of night masquerades and masquerading. This might result to conflict between the advocates of the Omabu night masquerades and those who felt that their rights have been infringed upon.

### **Conclusion**

Masquerades are said to be the departed ancestors who manifest in a masked spiritual being to have a reunion and to commune with the living members of their families and communities, bringing them good tidings/wishes while also intervening in their challenges and pains. It is therefore on this note that Dons Eze (2016:83) and Ojielo (2018:25) observed that masking in masquerade is the externalization of that intimate relationship between the living and the dead, where the living conceives of the dead as existing body and soul in the other world and constantly interacting with the living, albeit in masked forms. Masquerades cult are exclusively issues of men as women are forbidden from taking part in it. They are dreaded as revered by both men and women across bud. Masquerades are celebrated as cultural festivals in many places across Africa as well as North America and in some places in Asia. In Nigeria, masquerades feature prominently among Igbo-speaking people of which Oghe people in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State is one. In Oghe, as in many parts of Igbo societies, there are many types of masquerades. Among the popular night masquerades that exist among the traditional Oghe people, Omabu, the night masquerade happened to be one of them. In the then traditional Oghe lands, these particular masquerades had impacted positively in the lives of the people as seen and highlighted in this paper. Presently, the practice of Omabu as performing night masquerades is no longer in existence in many parts of Oghe as equally highlighted in this paper. With the change in time and space, the authors are of the opinion that Omabu, the night masquerades have outlived their usefulness and cannot be sustained and maintained in the present Oghe society. This paper is therefore a reflection of these masquerades as at the time they operated and the reason why it was abolished in the recent historic past.

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