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Igbo Masquerades as Colonial Satire: *The Ghost Policemen and Oyibo Masks*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

The Onye Ocha mask, Igbo's classic parody of the colonial white man! While some masks were for serious rituals, this one brought the drama, comedy, and satire to Igbo festivals. Pictured from p.d. Amawbia,

Anambra State, captured in the 1930s by G.I. Jones, at MAA

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Igbo ghost policemen masks, representing symbols of colonial authority, were part of the same masquerade performance as the Oyibo or Onye Ocha mask from Amobia (Amawbia), previously mentioned. Captured by G. I. Jones in the 1930s. MAA Cambridge.

Masquerades hold a central place in Igbo cultural and spiritual traditions, often serving as a means of social critique and historical documentation. One unique form of Igbo masquerade that emerged during the colonial period was the satirical portrayal of British colonial authorities, seen in the “Ghost Policemen” and “Oyibo” (White Man) masks. These performances, recorded by British anthropologist G. I. Jones in the 1930s, illustrate how Igbo communities used traditional artistic expression to mock, subvert, and reflect upon colonial rule.

01

The “Ghost Policemen” and the “Government” Character

The masquerade performance in Amawbia, a northern Igbo village, began with a character known as “Government.” This figure was hooded, faceless, and adorned with a European Homburg hat, symbolizing the impersonal and distant nature of colonial authority. In front of him lay an elephant tusk horn, a traditional Igbo symbol of power, emphasizing the contrast between indigenous and foreign rule. Speaking in “ghostly gibberish,” Government read from an “important-looking” document before withdrawing from the stage. This was likely a mockery of British bureaucratic processes, which were often incomprehensible to the local population.



Ghostly police sergeant holding a replica wooden rifle in one hand and a stick in the other, dressed in a dark police uniform reminiscent of present-day Anambra State, photographed by G. I. Jones in the 1930s.

Following “Government,” a group of masked figures representing colonial policemen and court messengers entered the stage. These “Ghost Policemen” wore imitations of British uniforms with cloth masks covering their heads and performed a military-style guard drill before taking their assigned posts to control the crowd. This performance was a direct satire of how local African intermediaries enforced colonial laws, often acting against their own people.

02

The Oyibo (White Man) Mask

After the Ghost Policemen came another striking figure, Oyibo, the White Man. Portrayed with a white mask, a sun helmet, and a white drill uniform, this character embodied the colonial officers who wielded administrative and political power. Oyibo performed a mock

inspection of the crowd before taking his seat among the distinguished guests. This portrayal highlighted the aloof and often intrusive nature of colonial officials, turning them into objects of ridicule through exaggerated movements and staged arrogance.

03

Symbolism and Social Commentary

These masquerades were more than just entertainment; they were a form of resistance. By parodying colonial figures, the Igbo people subverted their authority, turning them into laughable characters rather than feared rulers. The use of “gibberish” for Government’s speech ridiculed the British legal and bureaucratic systems, which many Nigerians found alien and oppressive. The Ghost Policemen, meanwhile, highlighted the complicity of African intermediaries in enforcing colonial rule, showing them as faceless and detached figures who blindly followed orders.

The presence of other masquerade characters, some representing spirits, animals, and village life, reinforced the idea that colonialism was just one part of the larger Igbo cosmology. Despite British dominance, Igbo culture persisted, adapting colonial imagery into its own traditional expressions.

04

Masquerades as a Form of Resistance

Throughout Igbo history, cultural resistance has played a key role in challenging oppression. The Aba Women’s War of 1929 and the

Ekumeku Movement (1898–1914) are examples of active resistance against colonial rule. However, the Ghost Policemen and Oyibo masquerades represent a different kind of defiance, one rooted in satire, performance, and communal storytelling.

Rather than directly confronting colonial authorities, these performances allowed Igbo communities to symbolically reclaim power, exposing the absurdity and contradictions of colonial governance. This aligns with broader African traditions where humour, satire, and masquerade serve as tools of social critique.

The Igbo Ghost Policemen and Oyibo masquerades provide a fascinating insight into how colonized societies used traditional cultural practices to critique and undermine colonial authority. By turning British officials and their African enforcers into theatrical characters, these performances challenged the legitimacy of colonial rule and preserved a sense of agency within Igbo communities. G. I. Jones' documentation of these masquerades is a valuable historical record, revealing how art, performance, and resistance were deeply intertwined in the Igbo response to colonialism.

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I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explores ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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