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Ijele Masquerade: *The Largest and Most Revered Masquerade in Igbo Land*

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

The Nsugbe Ijele marches forth through the town

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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IJELE MASQUERADE

Ijele Masquerade: The Largest and Most Revered Masquerade in Igbo Land

By Idenze Ezeme · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com

Ijele Masquerade is the biggest masquerade in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is an important tradition of the Igbo people in Nigeria. In many communities in Anambra State, South-Eastern Nigeria, the Ijele masquerade is performed during celebrations, burial ceremonies, and other special occasions in the dry season. It is believed to bring fertility and a good harvest.

01

Historical Origin



Ijele Masquerade: Photo: Ezejimbaz

Ijele originated many centuries ago in old Anambra State, Nigeria. According to oral history, it came from Umudiana Umueri. This group first introduced the Ijele masquerade to other communities such as Aguleri, Nsugbe, Ogbunike, Nando, and Awkuzu. The Umuatuolu Umueri group also helped spread Ijele to villages like Igbariam and Nteje.



Ijele Masquerade Performing at a Ceremony: By African Librarian

Because of the important role played by Aguleri and Umuleri in Ijele's history, the old Anambra State Government chose their Ijele cultural troupe to represent the state at the 1977 Festival of Art & Culture (FESTAC). The troupe was led by Chief Obiako Raphael Anizoba (Agunech'ibe) of Umuatuolu Umuleri and the Akunaeché Enyi Ijele cultural troupe from Igboezunu Aguleri. They won many awards from the Federal Government in 1977.

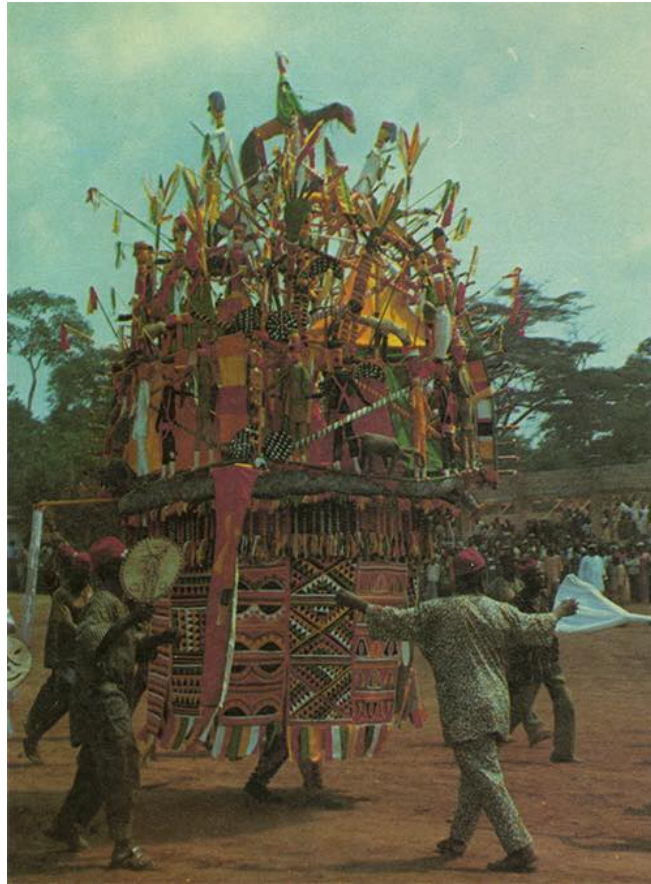
02

Description

Ijele is the largest masquerade in the world. It has two parts:

- The upper part is called Mkpu Ijele
- The lower part is called Akpakwuru Ijele or Ogbanibe

- The middle section, separating the two parts, is called Eke-Ogba (Python).



Ijele Masquerade, the biggest Masquerade in Africa. Photo: Chike Aniakor, 1970s.

Ijele stands 12 to 15 feet tall and is carefully balanced. It is made with colourful cloth, bamboo sticks, and canes by skilled craftsmen. Because of its large size, a special big house must be built for Ijele before it performs. It takes about 100 men working for six months to prepare Ijele's costumes and house before it is ready for an event.

03

Relevance of the Masquerade

Ijele is a special masquerade in Anambra and Enugu state. It is the King of all masquerades and, in the past, 45 smaller masquerades performed on top of it. Today, these 45 masquerades are represented by 45 figurines placed on Ijele.

Ijele is unique because it represents every aspect of life. It performs alone and is usually the last to perform at an event.

04

Structure of the Masquerade

Ijele is made up of four main characters:

- Nne Ijele (Mother Ijele): A beautiful female masquerade who holds a big ox tail and a carved enamel plate. She dances gracefully to soft music played with flutes.
- Ijele Father (Onuku): He has a big face and wears a chieftaincy outfit.
- Ijele Police: Six masquerades that ensure the crowd does not come too close to Ijele.
- Ijele Palm Wine Tapper: He follows Ijele and helps lift its rear as it moves.

Another important figure is the Ijele Fan Carrier (Akupe Carrier). This person holds a special fan that guides Ijele. If Ijele loses sight of the fan, it gets lost, which is seen as a sign of danger. Ijele moves when the fan carrier moves and stops when they stop.

05

Ijele Music

Ijele has its royal music, performed by a special band called Igba-eze (Royal Band). This music is also called Akunechenyi in Igbo. The instruments used include:

- Four drums
- Ogene (metal gong)
- Ubom (horn)

- Uyo
- Ekwe (wooden drum)
- Flute (Oja-ufele)
- Wooden clapper (Aja-oja)
- Ijele Mirror: This mysterious mirror can detect people carrying charms or weapons. If someone with harmful intentions comes near Ijele, the mirror pulls them towards it for punishment.
- Ijele Python: A large snake that represents royalty and power.
- Ijele Cloth/Fabrics: Ijele's fabric, called Ododo, is an expensive, colourful, velvety material. The most prominent colours are yellow, black, and red.
- Ijele Trees, Animals, White Men, and Carved Human Figures: These represent different aspects of life.
- Mermaid Objects: The top of Ijele has mermaid decorations, symbolizing its greatness.
- Ijele Horse: Represents majesty and greatness.

Societal Impact & Significance of Ijele

06

Spiritual & Social Importance

- Ijele is performed at the burials of great kings, leaders, and important men and women.
- It marks the dry season, fertility, and a good harvest.
- It is also performed at special festivals and occasions.

07

Political Importance

- People show their loyalty to their leaders by dancing alongside Ijele.
- If Ijele bows to a Chief or King, it means everyone should show respect.

08

Psychological Importance

- Ijele's appearance creates excitement and makes people feel a deep connection to Igbo culture.
- In some communities, young boys and girls sing and dance to Ijele's music.

09

Recreational Importance

- Ijele brings fun and entertainment to events.
- The sight of Ijele signals the high point of any festival.

Ijele never performs unless seven cannon gunshots are fired into the air along with its royal music. This shows that Ijele is more than just a masquerade—it is a spiritual and cultural symbol of unity, peace, and tradition among many communities in Anambra State, Nigeria.

- UNESCO. (2008). The Ijele Masquerade. UNESCO Multimedia Archives.
- Odinala Magazine. (n.d.). Mmemme Mmanwu.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Idenze Ezeme

Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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