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Mgbedike Masquerade: *Origins, Cultural Significance, and Traditions of a Revered Igbo Heritage*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**The Resurgence Of Mgbedike
Masquerade - Photo by Chioma
Ezeh: Mar 13, 2023.**

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MGBEDIKE MASQUERADE

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Introduction The Mgbedike masquerade is a prominent cultural performance in Igbo land, particularly in the southeastern region of Nigeria. Known for its striking costumes, powerful dances, and symbolic meanings, Mgbedike translates to “Time of the Brave” or “The Brave One Has Landed.” This masquerade embodies themes of courage, justice, and social order, reflecting the values...

01

Introduction

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Mgbedike-Type fierce masker with attendant Amawbia, ca. 1935. Photo: G. I. Jones.

02

Origin and Historical Background

Mgbedike masquerade originates from the Igbo concept of ancestor veneration and spiritual connection. It is believed to have emerged as a representation of warriors and brave spirits who protect and guide the community. The masquerade draws from ancient Igbo cosmology, where the spirits of the dead (mmuo) are thought to interact with the living during festivals and ceremonies.

Traditionally, Mgbedike was performed during major festivals like the New Yam Festival and Owu Oru (harvest celebrations), as well as in times of communal crises or celebrations of victory. Each performance is viewed as a spiritual event, where the masquerader channels

ancestral spirits to deliver messages, entertain, and maintain social harmony.

03

Cultural Significance

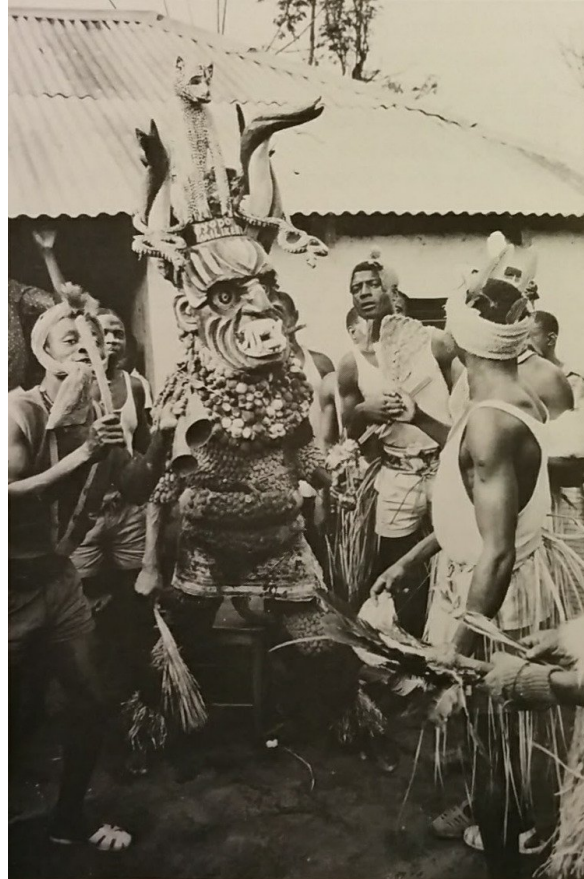
The Mgbedike masquerade serves multiple purposes in Igbo culture, including:

Mgbedike is considered a medium through which ancestral spirits communicate with the living. The masquerade's performances are believed to invoke blessings, protection, and guidance from the ancestors.

Mgbedike often delivers moral lessons and critiques through dance and dialogue. It reinforces social norms, addresses community issues, and warns against immoral behaviour, acting as a custodian of justice.

The elaborate performances of Mgbedike are highly entertaining, featuring acrobatics, dramatic gestures, and captivating dances. The masquerade's vibrant costumes and masks add to the spectacle, making it a highlight of cultural festivals.

Mgbedike embodies the values of bravery and honour, reinforcing the Igbo identity. Its continued performance preserves Igbo heritage, passing down traditions from one generation to the next.



Mgbèdíké-type Igbo masker. Obimo, present day Enugu State. Photo: David Ames, 1960s.

04

Techniques and Performance Style

Mgbedike costumes are elaborate and symbolic. The masquerader typically wears:

- **Wooden Masks:** The masks are often large, well carved, and painted in bright colours. They represent fierce expressions to evoke awe and respect.
- **Costumes:** The attire includes layers of colourful fabrics, raffia, leaves and beads. Some costumes incorporate animal motifs, symbolizing strength and agility.

05

Dance and Movements

Mgbedike performances are characterized by bold and energetic movements. The masquerader performs to the rhythm of traditional drums, flutes, and gongs. The dances often mimic combat, gallivanting, emphasizing agility, strength, and coordination.

06

Music and Drumming

Music plays a crucial role in Mgbedike performances. The drums set the pace, while flutes and gongs add melodic elements. Songs accompanying the masquerade often contain messages of valour, wisdom, and communal unity.



Mgbedike masquerade, Enugu Ezike by Odoja Asogwa and George Odoh.

07

Way of Life and Values

The Mgbedike masquerade is not just a performance but a way of life for those involved. The masquerader undergoes rigorous training, learning the spiritual and physical aspects of the role. This training instills values of discipline, bravery, and respect for tradition.

In many communities, participation in Mgbedike is a rite of passage, marking the transition from youth to adulthood. It also fosters community spirit, as the preparation and performance involve collaboration among various members of the community.

Contemporary Relevance and Challenges

While Mgbedike remains a vital cultural tradition, it faces challenges in modern times. Urbanization, religious shifts, and globalization have impacted the frequency and perception of masquerade performances. However, efforts are being made to preserve this tradition through cultural festivals, documentation, and education.

In contemporary settings, Mgbedike is often performed at cultural showcases and tourism events, highlighting its artistic and cultural value to a global audience.



Agaba/Mgbedike type Igbo mask photographed by Edward Chadwick, 1930s.

Conclusion

The Mgbedike masquerade is a powerful symbol of Igbo culture, embodying themes of bravery, justice, and ancestral reverence. It's elaborate performances and deep cultural meanings making it a treasured tradition. Despite modern challenges, Mgbedike continues to inspire and educate, preserving the rich heritage of the Igbo people.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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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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