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Reinterpreting Masculine Cultural Traditions:

The Hidden Influence of Women in Igbo Festivals

By Chukwunwike Ossai

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FEATURE
IMAGE

A woman in this picture is one of the women maskers of Nkaliki shot by Herbert Cole in 1983 dancing an Ogbodo Enyi mask amidst her female supporters.

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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Africa is a continent with many cultures. In places like Southern Nigeria, where the Igbo people live, one culture that almost everybody knows is the masquerade (or masking) tradition. People believe that only men masquerade, but they do not say how their fear or respect for women will help start some of these masquerade cults and festivals.

For example, in the Ukana community in Enugu State, a scholar called Elo said the Odo masquerade that they celebrate today started when women in the community controlled almost every social activity. Men disagreed again. They were angry and went to dig a secret tunnel that connected the bush to the market square. After two years, one strange creature that is Odo masquerade, came out from that tunnel. This got people scared, but he said that god sent him and said it's only men that will control it. From that day, the Odo masquerade cult and festival started. They formed it with lies, but it was to use it to hold women down.



Women are adorned with Nzu (chalk), symbolizing the spirituality of the festival, and they wear various green leaves as they chant, dance, and clean the market in preparation for the Aji Festival in Isobo. Photo credit: Ekureku Hub.

Another story came from Lejja in Enugu State. They have a festival called Imari Iyi Ede. The story says that when Lejja fought a war with Aku town, the deity in Lejja, that is, a woman spirit called Adada Nwabueze Ezema, helped win the war. To thank her, they started the festival. They went to pound cocoyam, carried it to the shrine, sacrificed cock, and poured the blood on cocoyam corms. Why cocoyam? Because yam is a crop that the Igbo people see as a man's food, cocoyam is associated with women. To honour Adada as a woman, they agreed to use cocoyam instead. They do not want to make Adada angry or bring problems.

The festival is not just a food and sacrifice alone. It's a sign that even in a male-dominated society, they still have fear and respect for women. This type of respect makes people careful about how they honour female spirits.



Shows that many festivals that people see as male traditions actually come from a place of fear, respect, or even jealousy of women's power. History doesn't hide the truth – it teaches us lessons. Whether it is Odo masquerade in Ukana or Imari Iyi Ede in Lejja, the fear of what women can do has made men create festivals that they use to protect themselves and control society.

So, when you next see masquerade dancing or a festival going on, you should ask, "What really caused this celebration?" It could be that a woman people feared or respected very well is behind it.

Opata, C. C., Apeh, A. A., Odoja, A. S., & Emmanuel, A. (2021). Women and evolution of cultural practices among the Igbo of Nigeria.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chukwunwike Ossai

An enthusiast in tech with deep passion for studying and showcasing the vibrant cultural heritage of southern Nigeria . Combining my skill with my obsession towards African history and traditions to create contributions that impacts the digital space.



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