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The Okumkpa Igbo Masquerade of Afikpo: *A Cultural Expression of the Igbo People*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Okumkpa masquerade play, Amuro village, Afikpo Village-Group (Cross River Igbo area), Nigeria, Eke day, 13 January, 1952. Photo: Simon Ottenberg. Smithsonian.

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Musicians and chorus at the Okumkpa performance, Mgbom village, Afikpo Village-Group (Cross River Igbo area), Nigeria, 1959-1960. Photo: Simon Ottenberg.

The Igbo people of Nigeria are known for their rich cultural heritage, and one of the most captivating aspects of this heritage is their masquerade traditions. In Afikpo, a town in southeastern Nigeria, the Okumkpa masquerade stands out as a unique blend of performance, spiritual expression, and social commentary.

The Okumkpa masquerade is an age-old tradition among the Igbo people of Afikpo, a community or tribe with a vibrant cultural life.

Historically, masquerades in Igbo society serve as intermediaries between the spiritual and physical worlds. The Okumkpa masquerade, however, goes beyond spiritual functions, providing a unique social and art experience. In Afikpo, it is not only a cultural practice but also a powerful form of artistic expression, representing ancestral spirits and serving as a means for the community to reflect on their values, histories, and concerns (Ottenberg, 1975).

Features and Structure of Okumkpa Performances

The Okumkpa masquerade is distinct for its lively and often humorous performances, incorporating drama, dance, and music. Performers, who are typically initiated men from the community, wear elaborate costumes and masks designed to both amuse and provoke thought. The masks, often crafted from wood and adorned with vibrant paint, have exaggerated facial features that capture the audience's attention. Costumes made from fabrics, raffia, and other locally sourced materials complete the performer's transformation into an otherworldly being.

The structure of an Okumkpa performance is intricate, often involving storytelling elements that portray real-life scenarios and moral lessons. Through satire and humor, the masquerade addresses social issues, critiques behavior, and encourages ethical values. According to anthropologist Simon Ottenberg (1975), the masquerade frequently deals with themes such as justice, community unity, and the challenges faced by the people. Performers might mimic certain members of society, creating an atmosphere of lighthearted critique and prompting self-reflection within the audience.



Okumkpa masquerade play, Amuro village, Afikpo Village-Group, Nigeria. Photo by Simon Ottenberg, early 1950s.

The Okumkpa masquerade fulfills both social and spiritual functions. Spiritually, it is believed to connect the community with ancestral spirits, bringing blessings and protection. The masquerade also serves to honor these spirits, which are thought to watch over the well-being of the people. During festivals, Okumkpa performances act as a medium through which the community expresses gratitude to their ancestors and seeks guidance.

Socially, the Okumkpa masquerade acts as an informal system of governance and social regulation. By addressing issues like theft, dishonesty, or lack of respect through satire, it reinforces societal norms and encourages moral behavior. The humor in Okumkpa is crucial, it allows performers to address sensitive issues in a way that is engaging and non-confrontational, making the messages more palatable for the audience.

Like many African cultural practices, the Okumkpa masquerade has

evolved over time. While it retains much of its traditional essence, influences from modernization and changing social structures have impacted its role. Younger generations, influenced by modern entertainment and lifestyles, may not connect with the masquerade as their ancestors did. However, efforts to preserve this heritage are ongoing, as cultural custodians and community leaders recognize its value in maintaining a sense of identity and continuity for the Igbo people of Afikpo.

In contemporary Igbo society, the Okumkpa masquerade remains a vibrant expression of cultural identity. It bridges the past and present, reminding the community of their shared values and heritage. It continues to offer a platform for social critique, entertainment, and spiritual connection, even as its format adapts to fit the changing world.

The Okumkpa Igbo masquerade of Afikpo stands as a testament to the creativity, spirituality, and resilience of Igbo culture. Through its vivid performances and layered symbolism, it serves as both entertainment and a vehicle for social reflection. The Okumkpa masquerade embodies the community's values, beliefs, and aspirations, providing an enduring link between generations. As the Igbo people navigate modernity, preserving the Okumkpa masquerade ensures that future generations can experience and appreciate this unique aspect of their cultural heritage.

Ottenberg, S. (1975). *Masked rituals of Afikpo: The context of an African art*. University of Washington Press.

Ottenberg, S. (1968). *Double Descent in an African Society — The Afikpo Village-Group*. University of Washington Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR**Chuka Odi**

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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